

# HARVARD SERIES



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# HOW IT CAME ABOUT.

BY

MAJA SPENCER,

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"SALT LAKE FRUIT," Etc., Etc.

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# HOW IT CAME ABOUT.

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## CHAPTER I.

### "THE LATE DEPARTED."

"I'll be a friend to the widow, sir. That's what I intend to be."

Herbert Ayres struck his hand very hard on the table, turning red in the face and looking angrily at the gentleman standing before the fire in Mr. Ayres' very comfortable office. Everything about the man was comfortable. He was just tall enough to be considered a good height, stout enough to suggest good living, was, besides being president of the bank, director and one of the largest stock holders in the "Consolidated Milling Company of Mulketawne," had always been able to control the majority of votes ; therefore, in all things, Herbert Ayres was comfortable.

Good looking, too, with a genial way about him, which gave a flavor to his hospitality, whether it was extended in a cigar or an invitation to dinner.



In fact, he was such an easy-going, comfortable fellow, that this rather violently expressed determination to befriend the widow, surprised the gentleman whom he had addressed.

"What do you know about her?" he asked twirling his moustache as he half smiled, and then shrugged his shoulders with an expression on his dark face that said as plainly as words could say, "Herbert Ayres I think you are making a fool of yourself."

"What do I know about her?" Mr. Ayres repeated the soft, drawling words. In his hearty voice they sounded quite aggressive. "I don't know anything more, sir, than what you have just told me. A woman, sir, who in time of a man's distress, sells her jewelery and gew-gaws, to help along, is a woman for a man to stand by."

"Indeed!"

Mr. Strathley had a soft way of saying his words that sometimes was charming, suggesting tenderness, and sometimes sneering, or at least suggesting a sneer, for in reality Hugh Strathley prided himself on being different from the commonplace man, and sneering is commonplace; thus he probably did not now intend that his voice should express it. It did, however, as well as his gray eyes,



that looked odd under very black lashes and eyebrows, and in his dark face.

Perhaps these eyes of his were more contemptuous than his voice, as he half closed them while watching Mr. Ayres as if he were a new discovery.

“Yes, indeed!” Mr. Ayres repeated stoutly. “And that’s just what I intend to do—stand by the widow!”

“And oppose yourself to Jim’s last will and testament?” asked Hugh Strathley.

“Yes, sir!” replied Mr. Ayres.

He was less angry now, giving a little laugh as he went on, putting his hands in his pockets and stretching out his legs, all indicative that he was returning to his usual state of comfort. “Well, after all, how little we know of a fellow until he dies! There was John Tell, leading, as we supposed, a most exemplary life, and after his death up pop two families, each claiming the first right to his estate. This, however, about Jim is more serious to me, because, you see, it strikes home. For Jim to have sat at my table, my wife asking as nicely as possible after his wife, and he giving all sorts of pleasant answers, and then to die and cast a slur upon her by leaving her entirely out of his will! It’s a shame, I tell you! An outrage! I’ll stand by her, sir, to my last dollar!”

“Ah!”

Hugh Strathley's “Ah” was half a breath, half a sigh at Mr. Ayres' return to excitement. He offered him a cigar, possibly to quiet his nerves. Shrugging his shoulders, and putting the case back in his pocket at Mr. Ayres' positive refusal, “Possibly you will moderate your blame of poor Jim,” he said, in his soft drawl, “when I tell you that, while years back she certainly (Jim told me so at the time) sold her jewels to help him out of a bad scrape, she has led him a hard life since. She's a perfect virago. I suppose the poor fellow was in the fix of the man who, married to a woman, preferred first divorce, then death, rather than living with her! Jim took death.”

“Why didn't he try divorce?” asked Mr. Ayres.

“She wouldn't let him have it, so the poor fellow had no alternative. He had to die or live with her,” said Hugh, with comical plaintiveness.

“He didn't live with her very much, always bumming round New York, or lounging in Mulketawne, or any place but where he said his home was! Nice home too, for a fellow of means. A hotel! As for dying! He took a long time about it, growing fat all the while. About as comfortable a looking fellow as I ever saw. Always enjoying



himself. Dying, too, in an easy way. Just lying down for a nap after eating a hearty dinner, and declining to waken when called. If that's the desperation a man feels at being married to a virago, I don't think he deserves much pity."

Mr. Ayres had been speaking in his natural voice, quite slowly and comfortably, while Hugh Strathley, apparently exhausted by his friend's vehemence, drew a chair to the fire, and still pulling at his moustache, gazed contemplatively into the bright flames that, bursting out in every direction, made the cannell coal a thing of beauty. Perhaps Hugh thought the discussion was over, for he once more took out his cigars, and with great care was about to select one, when Mr. Ayres asked abruptly :

"A virago ! Did you ever see her ? Who told you so ?"

"Softly, my dear fellow; one question at a time," drawled Hugh. With a resigned sigh, he put his cigar from him.

"A virago ! Number 1. Who told me ? Answer to question, Jim. Number 2. Did I ever see her ? Answer to question, Never. Remarks by witness, From viragoes and all such, good Lord deliver me."

"H—m," grunted Mr. Ayres.

Then, with a smile that widened his face into geniality, showing teeth nearly as handsome as Hugh Strathley's which, like his eyes, were more remarkable because of his dark skin. "Well Hugh, that's a prayer not likely to be granted. You'll perforce, have a good deal to do with Mrs. Jim Belling, who, if she's not a virago, and I don't believe she is, may have enough spirit to stand up for her rights. Too bad, Hugh, your effort at holiness should be thrown away, for I believe in encouraging first efforts. You've only yourself to blame, however. Why, my dear fellow, did you accept the position of executor?"

"I'm not the first good-natured fool," responded Mr. Strathley. "Besides, who ever connected the idea of death with Jim Belling? If I had thought he had had the intention of soon retiring from business, I would not have been so foolish. As it is, I suppose I'm in for it."

He rose as he spoke. Standing tall and straight and throwing aside his languid manner as he might have thrown a coat he had assumed, he was a really attractive man. And although gray eyes were somewhat out of harmony with that olive skin, they had a way of changing and deepening, so altogether he was not ugly.



"Ayres" he said, "I was a fool to have accepted the trust, but Jim put it in such a direct manner. And I had no idea of the tenor of his will. He had told me his wife was a virago, that he couldn't live with her, and asked me to look after his sister's interests, but I did not imagine he had left her his sole heir. It seems a downright shame to me as well as to you, but I'm pledged to the other side. And so I suppose must support the will. Besides, I have always believed a man has the right to do what he pleases with his money. I've said this to him a hundred times, and he has remembered it against me. If the fellow wasn't dead, I'd fight him for putting me in such a box with a woman."

"With two of them," laughed Herbert Ayres. And then, in his comfortable effort to console Mr. Strathley. "But do you know the wording of the will? Perhaps there's a loophole left which will make it advisable for the heir to compromise with the injured widow, and you can divide the loaf between the two, and creep out of your uncomfortable post of helping to defraud a poor creature of her right, and cry, 'Bless you, my children,' or something of that kind."

"Not a chance for the widow's rights except

by legal interference, nor a ghost of a chance for me to be amiable to both. Here's the copy of the will sent me by Miss Belling's lawyer. The will is filed here in Mulketawne, where most of Jim's property lies. It's already in the lawyer's hands." Hugh went on slowly, while Mr. Ayres, reading the will, nodded to him, and then when he had finished the document, read it over twice. Turning, he threw the paper on the table, springing to his feet, exclaiming: "It's a shame! a d—d shame! Not a mention of her! By Jove she'll have to fight if she wants her rights. She has to have money to begin the suit. Poor old thing, for I suppose she is a poor old thing. Men don't treat young or pretty women quite so shabbily. Well, I'll stand by her. I've said it, and I'll stick to my word."

"Will Mrs. Ayres consent?" asked Hugh.

He had rehabilitated himself in his languid indifference, was smiling too, with the mingling of sarcasm and amusement.

"My wife!" exclaimed Herbert Ayres; and then heartily, "Mrs. Ayres is the warmest hearted little woman in the world—always ready to fight the battles of every other woman."

"But you? Would she be as willing for you to fight a woman's battles?"



"For me! Why of course she would! Do you think my wife's a fool? Do you think my wife's jealous? Why, Ha! Ha! Ha! You make me laugh, you surely have forgotten Mrs. Ayres, or you'd know she is fully fifteen years younger than I, and as pretty a woman as there is in the State of Michigan."

"I've not forgotten Mrs. Ayres, and I do remember her as the very prettiest woman of all the pretty ones I have met. I don't presume either to accuse the lady of any folly. And to be jealous of a good-looking, whole-souled fellow like you, who is equally kind to every body, certainly would be a folly;" and here Mr. Strathley, who had again thrown aside his lazy drawl, resumed it. "But I have read somewhere that jealousy is no respecter of sex or person. Like love, all ages are liable to attacks—and relapses are especially fatal. From both of which good Lord deliver me."

"Your second prayer! Strathley, you are getting pious. Well, old boy, you don't know what comfort is until you do marry. And I'll tell you, confidentially, if you never suffer from woman's love or jealousy more than I, you had better marry at once. I waited a long time, and never knew what happiness was until I married Hel——"

“There, there, friend ! Have mercy on a poor, overwhelmed wretch. Don’t breathe matrimony to me. Not, at least, while I’m in the thick of this battle, with hot shot pouring in from both sides. See what the morning’s mail brought, and pity me. The lawyer’s letter arrived a month ago, just after Jim’s death. That I let wait until I could breathe. But this morning, poisoning my coffee, the sole enjoyment of my life, these double fires opened. I sprang into the sleigh, raced to the train, boarded it while moving, ran all the way from the depot to your office to implore you to take the whole thing off my hands, and lo ! another enemy.”

He threw himself into the chair from which he had just risen, holding out two envelopes to Mr. Ayres.

One was large, square, bordered with black, and directed in a fine English hand to

<p>MR. HUGH STRATHLEY, <i>Manager Consolidated Milling Company,</i> <i>Mulketawno,</i> <i>Michigan.</i></p> <p>[Please forward.]</p>
--

and was altogether so agreeable to Mr. Ayres that he opened it at once.



*Mr. Hugh Strathley:*

MY DEAR SIR:—You have already heard of my brother's death. I had intended writing you before, but was so overcome with grief that I was incapable of thinking of anything. Now, however, I am forced to arouse myself from the indulgence of sorrow to ask your attendance to my brother's affairs, and to say to you, that having so often heard him praise you, I feel secure of your interest in his sister, for his sake. I assure you, as the one he considered his best friend, I will trust entirely to your judgment, and am ready to most thoroughly endorse his confidence in you.

Very sincerely yours,

HELEN BELLING.

"Nice hand," said Mr. Ayres speaking regretfully, for since he had declared himself the friend of the widow, he regretted this first knock down for the other side. He actually sighed as he handed the note to Mr. Strathley and turned the other envelope over as he held it.

That was certainly not a nice hand. Written evidently in the most violent hurry; mailed in a hurry too, if the smears of ink were any signs.

And the envelope! A United States stamped envelope! Yellow at that!

Mr. Ayres looked so ruefully at Hugh Strathley, that that gentleman did what was not very usual—he burst into a hearty fit of laughter.

It is a pity he did not laugh oftener, for when he did, he was positively handsome. And his

laugh was of the kind that makes others laugh. Mr. Ayres, laughing with him, turned over and over again, that blotted and smeared envelope, opening it most reluctantly, and only then when Mr. Strathley said :

“ Read it. You might as well know something of the woman you have determined to champion.”

The letter was no better than the envelope. Written on a torn half sheet of foolscap, with several blots to mark the superfluity of ink and the scarcity of neatness or patience, perhaps of both:

“ MR. STRATHLEY :— A month ago the will of Jim Belling was read in my presence. In my presence, think of it, and I, his wife, not mentioned in it. Now I hear there has been made no provision to pay even the expense of the past six months' board at hotel. That man made me miserable while he was alive, and now, dead, has left insults to be heaped upon me. As executor I expect you to attend to that bill, sir. I have no means to defray that bill, nor will I ever do it. And what is more, this last injury has decided me to fight for my rights, and I don't expect you to interfere with them. EUNICE BELLING.”



## CHAPTER II.

### "THE POSTSCRIPTS."

"Eunice Belling," said Mr. Ayres, reflectively. "Ah! Eunice! Come, that's not a bad name. Now, Strathley, do stop that laughing. I don't see anything funny in this thing."

Indeed Mr. Ayres had grown very serious, frowning at Hugh, who rolled about in his chair, shouting with laughter at the picture made by Mr. Ayres with that torn sheet of paper held between the forefingers and thumbs of both hands, as one holds some objectionable object under protest.

"Funny?" said Hugh, "The fun is, how you look at it!" and then off into laughter he went.

"I can not see any thing funny in any way," said Mr. Ayres, more serious as Hugh's hilarity increased.

"This poor old woman probably had not another piece of paper in the house. Unfortunate creature! I don't know any position in the world more unfortunate than that of a neglected wife."

“Or more unpleasant than to have an untidy one!” interposed Hugh, shouting with fresh amusement at the disgusted expression, that despite his effort at self-control, crept over Mr. Ayres’ face, for if there was one thing more necessary to his comfort than another, it was neatness.

“Well, she might have been more tidy.” Mr. Ayres was trying to make the best of it. “Perhaps that was the reason Jim never invited me to his hotel. I’ve often wondered why, when I chanced to stop over at Beloit, he always took me to lunch at the restaurant. Poor Jim,” with a sigh that made Mr. Strathley call out :

“Take care, Ayres! or after all you’ll desert the widow.”

“Never! An unfortunate old ——. Great guns! Hugh, look here!” — Mr. Ayres, probably because he was married and accustomed to woman’s little ways, had chanced to look on the other side of that untidy sheet of foolscap; and there, written diagonally across the page, with a great villainous blot to make it more conspicuous, were the words, “I shall be down to Mulketawne to-morrow on some train with Hellen Belling.”



"Jehosaphat!" exclaimed Hugh Strathley, becoming of a sickly yellow, as every vestige of color deserted his face. "What am I to do?"

"Do, my dear fellow!" replied Mr. Ayres, jauntily, thus proving how superior in emergencies is a married man. "Go to meet them, of course."

"Meet them!" rejoined Hugh, angrily.

"How do I know Miss Belling is coming? I would not rely upon testimony given in such a manner."

Mr. Strathley's face was very contemptuous as he looked at the "P. S.," with its huge blot. Turning over the sheet of paper, giving another look at the blurred and blotted letter, and then, with some venom, doubling it up into a little ball and throwing it in the fire, with the words, "I wish I were as easily rid of the whole affair."

He sat moodily staring, as the flames encircled the paper. "Upon my word, Ayres, I would never have believed that a woman could terrify me as the very thought of this one does. When the idea comes that I am to meet that old creature, snorting with fury and the sense of injustice—I'll not do it. I am not obliged to face Mrs. Jim

Belling. I'm not the executor of her will. There, Ayres, you're the man sworn to befriend Jim's relict. Meet her if you will; I'm off to the woods. They positively need me at the lumber camp. Just time for the train." And off started Mr. Hugh Strathley, his long legs reaching the door before Mr. Ayres' very comfortable members.

Mr. Ayres, however, was just in time to prevent the door's closing upon his friend's ignominious flight, grabbing his shoulder and holding fast, although he was heartily laughing at Hugh's expense.

"Ha! ha! ha! Hugh Strathley a coward! Taking to his heels because a widow comes to town! As if a poor widow had no rights! Ha! ha! can't an old woman come to town?"

"Yes, and welcome!" exclaimed Hugh; "welcome to the entire town. I won't even deprive her of sufficient space for my body. Say, Ayres, let go! I tell you business, imperative business demands my presence at the lumber camp. It's a matter of thousands of dollars to the company. Let go, I say."

Mr. Strathley was becoming very angry. But Mr. Ayres did not object in the least to this display of temper. In fact, he rather enjoyed it,



laughing on in his pleasant, genial way. And being more habituated to laughter than Mr. Strathley, his mirth was not so uproarious, as, with one arm locked fast in the unwilling arm of Hugh Strathley and the other thrown over his shoulder, he necessitated his friend either to fight or yield.

Hugh Strathley was in such a bad humor that at first he was inclined to fight. But he really liked Herbert Ayres, and moreover liked Mrs. Herbert Ayres, and while he knew that if he and Ayres were to fight, they might shake hands over it, and be as good friends as ever; he suspected Mrs. Ayres would not be easily propitiated. So the red flush that had made him darker, faded; he fell into his lazy drawl, and ceasing resistance, said: "Do with me as you will. I am in that deplorable condition, in the hands of my friends!"

"That's sensible." Ayres patted him on the back, led him to his chair, gave him an encouraging slap on the shoulder, bade him "rise to the occasion," and then said: "Now, Hugh, old man, what you have to do, do bravely; there's nothing women like so much as courage. It subdues them at once. I know something of women, you see. Six years is quite an experience. And though I must say Mrs. Ayres is the most amiable of her

sex, yet even in such smooth sailing, resolution has been effective. In fact, my dear fellow my wife has told me, that she despised a man who couldn't face a woman, and has really given me to understand that one reason she accepted me was, because I did not seem ever to be afraid."

While saying this, Mr. Ayres had such an air of thorough good fellowship that the speech did not sound ridiculous as it might otherwise have done. Just now, however, he might have been extremely ridiculous, and not have seemed funny to Mr. Strathley, who was too serious to see fun in anything.

Gazing gloomily into the fire, "What should I do?" he asked.

"Go down to the train; it is both kindly and sensible. By this little courtesy, as a reply to Mrs. Belling's announced arrival, you will show that you personally have no feeling against her. In the end it will save you lots of trouble. If the widow contests the will, and she as much as declares she intends to, she will not torment you, if she believes you friendly. If not, she'll make your life a torture. Why, my dear boy, I've known executors driven to desperation by contesting heirs! The very best course for you is, by a simple act of courtesy, to disarm the old lady."



Herbert Ayres delivered his opinion like one who knew what he was talking of, standing, in a lordly way, with his back to the fire, and smiling down upon his dejected friend.

His amusement had considerably abated, for he was too kind hearted to laugh long at another's expense. Still it would be beyond human nature not to blandly enjoy the comicality of the situation, for Mr. Strathley was so deadly serious, and as Mr. Ayres said :

“After all, Hugh, it's only one woman. And she has no claim on you.”

“Yes,” replied Mr. Strathley. “I understand all that. In your position I could probably see how trifling the whole affair is ; in mine, I can not. It's the way one looks at it. To meet a woman is not terrible. I've met many, and nothing serious has resulted. Only, you see, “frowning,” to save my life, I do not understand why I should go to meet Mrs. Jim Belling. I have never before acted as executor, but, hang me, it seems a little out of place for the executor of a man to force his attentions upon a widow whom the late departed evidently had no cause to cherish.”

Mr. Strathley spoke like one who hopes, but without much expectation of release from a disagreeable necessity.

“Why my dear fellow”—Mr. Ayres was becoming just a little fatigued at Hugh Strathley’s persistent desire to escape from what he considered the simple duty of a gentleman—“you are really making mountains out of molehills! It is a courtesy to meet an old lady arriving in a strange town, especially now when the train gets in so near dusk. I can imagine how anxious the poor woman was, knowing woman as well as I do; I can see anxiety in every hurried stroke of her pen. Where is the letter? I will show you——”

“The letter’s there!” Mr. Strathley pointed to a fluffy roll of black cinder, resting on the coal, that moved about uneasily, stirred by every puff of air, as if even the fire had been unable to destroy the impatient spirit it had possessed. “There it is.” With a sigh, Mr. Strathley watched the incinerated relic of Mrs. Belling’s letter.

He was thinking of old Mrs. Belling arriving in Mulketawne, of no one being at the depot to meet her, of the nervous fears of old ladies in general, of which he really knew nothing, but imagined that they might be something awful. And—well, not being a bad fellow, he had about decided he would take Mr. Ayres’ advice and stand up bravely, by going to the depot, and driving her where she intended to locate.



"Perhaps you know best, Ayres," he said, looking up.

"Of course I do, at least about women," was Mr. Ayres' modest rejoinder.

"Well, then, I'll go." With a resigned air, Hugh Strathley took his hat and once more was about to leave. Not precipitately this time, but with the quiet resolution of a man who had nerved himself to an unpleasant trial. But Mr. Ayres was too hospitable to permit this.

"No, no," he said, "Old boy, you can't get off this way. I've given unpalatable advice; you've swallowed the pill, and like a good fellow are going to do your duty. Now, we must give you a little inspiration."

He touched the bell, the office boy appeared, and, understanding Mr. Ayres' nod, disappeared, returning very shortly afterward with a bottle of champagne and two glasses; filling which, he left the gentlemen regarding the sparkling, bubbling stimulant, with the ice cold bottle convenient to the hand of Mr. Ayres.

"You see, Hugh," Mr. Ayres was almost fatherly in his tone, "there is nothing a gentleman can do but live up to his character. Certain things are expected of us, and of course we must comply with the requirements of society."

They had each finished one glass of champagne, drinking according to their different moods—Mr. Ayres lightly sipping his, admiring the bead in the wine, as he held it between his eyes and the light, and Mr. Strathley moodily gulping his down. Now, Mr. Ayres refilling, for both were becoming philosophical.

“Life is full of *contretemps* Hugh; I acknowledge it is deucedly unpleasant having to encounter the wronged wife of a dead man. In fact, I believe there ought to be a way of reaching the departed, and making him stand up to the difficulties he has left behind him. But since we can't do it, we must do the best we can, and get over the matter as easily as possible in justice to ourselves.”

And in the most abstracted manner, because that fluffy relic of the burned letter caught his glance and he inwardly shuddered at the remembrance of its untidiness, he sighed, “Poor Jim!”

“Poor Jim!” indignantly interrupted Mr. Strathley, unwilling, now he had decided to accept martyrdom, that Jim should share any of the commiseration he felt was strictly his due. “Poor Jim, indeed! I feel very much like saying, Damn Jim! For if ever a dead man slipped out of



annoyances and forced them on the living, who had never done anything but be civil to him, it's Jim Belling."

Then somehow he too returned to watching that light relic of Mrs. Belling's departed letter.

Both gentlemen had now taken their third glass, and while each sip made Mr. Ayres more amiable, with every swallow of the enlivening, sparkling wine, Mr. Strathley sank deeper into moodiness.

"A nice looking letter for a woman to send to any one," he said sneeringly, still watching the burned paper.

"Ah, well," replied Mr. Ayres, "we must consider the circumstances. Poor creature, of a quick temper, feeling herself wronged, growing old too, and probably with no visible means of support! Upon my soul, I excuse the appearance of that letter."

With a charming smile he turned to Mr. Strathley, who had pushed away his glass, and, refusing more wine, was returning Mr. Ayres' glance with a sneer.

"Ayres!" he said, "I hate to hear a man talk such d——d nonsense. You forgive that letter! Why, that untidy letter, written by one whom you

conceive to be a wronged woman, has actually deprived her of your real interest. A lady once told me that a man would sooner forgive a grave offense than a soiled collar. I denied this, but by Jove she was right! You've proven it to me this day, and with your kind disposition! 'The very last man I would have suspected of heartlessness.'

"Heartlessness! Really Mr. Strathley, I think you are inclined to quarrel. Heartlessness is unworthy a gentleman. As for a soiled collar, or an untidy letter, neither weighs with me against an injury to a woman. That, I think, I have sufficiently proven in the position I have assumed with regard to Mrs. Belling." Mr. Ayres spoke somewhat stiffly.

"Have you proven it?" drawled Mr. Strathley, with an objectionable sneer. "You've said what you would do. But I don't see that professions of future assistance prove anything. It is possible, Mrs. Belling, should she intend to contest the will, her money to do it, and your position, as you call it, will probably amount to nothing more than the profession of what you *would* do. Whereas, this courtesy you insist on as due from me, is one she could as well receive from you, and this would be a present help."

"Not at all, sir, not at all. If she had written to me and not to you, if I could truthfully offer any excuse as to your inability to meet her, I would do it. But there Hugh! Don't grow absurd. Here, take a cigar! You've not much time to meditate, the train is due at five, and," looking at his watch, "it is now past four. Bear up, old boy!"

Again excessively amiable, Mr. Ayres, pushing a cigar across the table to Mr. Strathley, lit one for himself, puffing away, the picture of a thoroughly comfortable man.

Without noticing the cigar, Mr. Strathley picked up the neat envelope containing Miss Belling's letter and began to look at it. Glancing at him, Mr. Ayres suddenly remembered the words of Mrs. Belling's postscript.

"By the by, Hugh," he said. "Hadh't you better see if Miss Belling herself makes any mention of visiting Mulketawne?"

"I don't believe she has thought of it," said Mr. Strathley, not making a motion toward opening the envelope. From her letter she seems a sensible, nice lady, who would probably say all she intended, without any stupid afterthoughts to be added in a postscript."



“Ha! Ha! My dear fellow, how deplorably ignorant you are about the fair sex. Bless you, their postscripts don't contain their afterthoughts, but the whole gist of their letters. Miss Belling may be very sensible, but she is a woman, and *ergo* will, in all probability, have her postscript, as well as her brother's widow. At any rate, look.”

Thus abjured, Mr. Strathley opened the letter, and after leisurely reading the entire note, turned the page with, “I do not believe Miss Belling's the sort that indulges in postscripts.”

He flushed, however, looking at Ayres with a crestfallen expression as he saw two neatly written lines headed with an irreproachable “P. S.” “My lawyer advises a little visit to Mulketawne, which he says is a charming place. He believes it would be as well for me to know just what property my brother leaves.”

Ayres chuckled to himself when Hugh, with “You're right Ayers, there is a ‘P. S.,’” acknowledged his superior knowledge of womankind.

After Ayers had read the neat postscript he glanced at Hugh, with doubt in his eyes. “By Jove! Hugh, this is awkward to have, at the same time, to meet both claimants!” he exclaimed.

“Meet both,” replied Hugh, resolution replac-

ing his gloom, "I'll not meet both. With all respect to the widow, a positive duty absolves from an outside courtesy. Miss Belling is absolutely in my care. She is in fact, my ward, therefore meet her, I must. The widow can look out for herself. Unless," with a sneer, "you, Ayres, are ready to prove your words good, and receive this wandering relict of poor Jim, eh?"

Relieved of his uncomfortable position, Mr. Strathley's spirits rose; he actually smiled at Mr. Ayers. It was not an amiable smile. In fact, it was a taunting smile, implying that Mr. Ayres' sympathy for the widow, was after all but a matter of words. At least so it seemed to that gentleman, who took up the insinuation at once.

"I will prove my words sir," he said, "by meeting Mrs. Belling."

"Will you?" exclaimed Hugh.

"I will," rejoined Mr. Ayres, decidedly.

"Your hand on it." Mr. Strathley extended his.

"There!" Mr. Ayres placing his hand in Mr. Strathley's.

"Swear it!" Mr. Strathley was more excited than if lumber had advanced, and the demand was unprecedented.

Mr. Ayers, on the contrary, had lost somewhat the exhilaration of the champagne, and was considering Mr. Strathley's present mood as decidedly childish. It certainly was unlike Hugh Strathley's usual bearing, for if there had been in Mulketawne, a man noted for general indifference and freedom from all nervousness, it had been Hugh Strathley.

"You surprise me, Strathley," said Mr. Ayres, his nice brown moustache raised by the scornful curving of his lips. "You not only surprise, but you disappoint me. I had really believed you a man of some stamina, yet no child could act more foolishly than you are now doing."

"I know it," was Mr. Strathley's frank admittance. "By Jove, Ayres, I surprise myself, for I too had a notion that I was a fellow of some independence, but I am not. I am a most deplorable coward! A contemptible coward! Why, that old woman has become worse than a nightmare. I prefer this moment to walk off to the woods and, unarmed, tackle a hungry bear, than meet Mrs. Belling at the depot this afternoon. When I believed she was coming alone, I had decided to do my duty, or at least what you considered my duty, and meet her. You put the case so deuced strong, and a fellow rather clings to the idea of being con-



sidered a gentleman. But now that Miss Belling is also to arrive, I hold to her more than a drowning man to a plank. As for your word, Ayres, I hope you don't think I doubt it. I'll prove I trust you by this instant taking your word only, for the loan of five M's. But this widow!—this creature of foolscap paper and yellow envelopes and blots—trifling as meeting her seems to you, it has become so exaggerated to me, that if you want to do a friendly act, just swear you'll meet her. That's a dear old boy! Humor me as you would a fellow with a touch of the jim-jams."

"I have humored you," Mr. Ayres spoke coolly, but his moustache went higher than before, for his contempt at Strathley's stupidity was becoming more and more positive.

"You'll meet Mrs. Jim Belling, even if your wife objects," persisted Strathley.

"You're going a little too far, Mr. Strathley," Mr. Ayres said stiffly.

"I know I am," exclaimed Strathley, and again his frankness disarmed Mr. Ayres. "Too far. I should say I am. I am proving myself a consummate ass to you, and to me, probably the only two men whose esteem I value. Yet, upon my soul, I can not help it. I am like a demoralized army.

Nothing can save me, but a stone wall that blocks my flight. Your wife, the loveliest, quite the loveliest, woman I have ever met, has become a hostile power. Looming up, in my imagination, she is ready to carry you off. Your word might be—now no high strikes, Herbert; no one honors your word more than I—but I repeat, there might arise emergencies which would absolve you from keeping it. But your oath, your oath for this once! Even against your wife's will, would bring me back to reason."

"Of which I see little evidence," said Mr. Ayres, in the same stiff manner, but bursting into a laugh at Hugh.

"Little evidence? Not a bit. You could get a commission *de lunatico*, and put me in an asylum from what has occurred within the last hour."

"Poor fellow!" laughed Ayres.

"Too poor for contempt," said Hugh. "So swear, there's a good old boy."

"Well, I swear to meet Mrs. Belling at the depot this p. m. That is I swear to be at depot at 5 o'clock, and to receive Mrs. Belling if she arrives."

"Whether your wife will let you or not?"

"I will meet Mrs. Belling," said Mr. Ayres,

becoming less good-tempered as Strathley again offended by bringing in Mrs. Ayres' name.

But Strathley did not notice Mr. Ayres' access of dignity.

"Herbert Ayres!" he exclaimed. "You're —— a remarkable man. I shall forever hold you above your fellows! Phew!" and Strathley threw himself back in his chair, wiping off the perspiration, which had started out over his face.

He laughed, making Mr. Ayres laugh also. Not so pleasantly as Mr. Ayres generally laughed, for he had had a serious disappointment in Mr. Strathley. Somehow, from Hugh's general deportment, from accounts that had reached him of his exploits in several hunting parties, and some trophies of his skill in the shape of fine bear skins that were sent to Mr. Ayres, as well as his excellent head for business, Mr. Ayres had believed that Hugh Strathley was a strong man.

He had had considerable pride in his friendship, stating on occasions that "Strathley was a fellow of some stability." Then, too, without being an ascetic Hugh was moderate in most things, and never bragged, not even of his games of pool. In fact, doing all sorts of quiet, gentlemanly things. Until since their business connection, which had



begun about the time of Ayres' marriage Herbert Ayres had for Strathley both liking and admiration.

Now he had fallen from the pedestal, and Herbert unconsciously was elevating himself, for he well knew no woman could make a fool of him.

Certain conjugal endearments with which Mrs. Ayres had favored him, arose to his memory, and he mentally commended her judgment. Now he could understand how he had been able to captivate such a charming young creature. "You see, my dear," Mrs. Ayres had often said, "I love you because you are never foolish like other men. You don't tyrannize: I despise tyrants: nor yet are you ever afraid; I hate cowards. Then you always tell me the exact truth! Therefore I trust you, and I love you, you dear old ducksey." Here Mr. Ayres' retrospect of these highly satisfactory interviews was disturbed by that deeply unsatisfactory specimen of the *genus homo*, Hugh Strathley.

Rather wilted, for his collar had somewhat yielded to the moist expressions of past agitation, Hugh was mopping his face as he said:

"Ayres, call your boy. Let's open a fresh bottle. I can not recover my equilibrium. In fact, it seems to me that I'll never again reach the level

of common sense. A moment ago I was desperate, now I am so exhilarated that I want to shout like a revivalist. Positively, I am prevented only by my regard for you from falling upon your neck like the prodigal son. Perhaps a little stimulant, fresher than this, which, excellent as it is, tastes to me of the dejection I was in when I drank it—a little fresh stimulant might have a good effect! Let me order a bottle!”

He did so, and with fresh glasses and cigars, took the *rôle* of excessive comfort from Mr. Ayres, seeming, despite the dilapidated collar, and a generally tumbled appearance, as nearly happy as a man, or at least as Hugh Strathley, had ever appeared.

But he was not yet at all like Hugh Strathley. Even now, somewhat quieted, holding up his glass as Mr. Ayres had previously done his, and admiring the light, gassy bubbles through the clear liquid, he was so unlike quiet, cool, languid Hugh Strathley, that Mr. Ayres could hardly realize he was the same.

Still, there was something infectious in his rising mirth, for after five glasses of champagne man's judgment is not clear, for within a half hour, the two gentlemen had so gravitated to-

ward the old platform of intimate relations, that they were both amusing themselves over Hugh's past misery, and speculating as to what course would be pleasanter for the living executor of the dead Jim.

"I tell you, Ayres," said Strathley, after Mr. Ayres had telephoned for two carriages to meet the five o'clock train, "I'll have to dispose of Jim's property according to his will, but I think there's a way you can be helped out with your self-imposed obligations to the widow. I know of a little transaction," confidentially, "which unless changed, will right the widow without a legal contest. For now you've come so nobly to the rescue, I feel rather amiable to the old lady. Here's long life to her!"

He sprang to his feet, holding up his glass, his eyes sparkling with fun.

Herbert Ayres caught his mood.

"Here's life to the Widow!" he cried, and both were in the act of drinking a bumper, when ting-a-ling went the telephone bell.



## CHAPTER III.

### "THE TELEPHONE."

Mr. Ayres, finishing his wine, was toward the last so much hurried by the very persistent ting-aling of the telephone that a drop, not more than one drop, of champagne went astray, and, meandering toward the gentleman's windpipe, brought on a violent fit of coughing.

Cough, cough, cough, went Mr. Ayres.

Ting-ling-ling, went the telephone.

Cough, cough, cough, cough, cough, went Mr. Ayres.

Ting-ling-ling-ling-ling-ling, went that telephone, holding to its sharp ting-ling with such pertinacity that Mr. Ayres, making an effort, summoned breath sufficient to shout, "Damn that bell." and then fell into such a violent fit of coughing that Hugh Strathley, who, divided between his desire to relieve Ayres by patting his back, and the wish to stop that noisy telephone, had been taking first a step toward the telephone and then another toward Mr. Ayres; becoming seriously

alarmed at the purpling of his friend's face, hesitated no longer, but sprang to his side.

Mr. Ayres' paroxysm of coughing was so excessive that Hugh feared dire results. Mrs. Ayres' grief, her distraction if anything should happen to her husband, sent a flush of hot sympathy over Hugh, and then a cold shiver ran down his back, for, if anything happened to Ayres, who would meet the Widow at 5 P. M.?

Inspired by these diverse dreads, Strathley began to thump his friend's back so heartily that, had Ayres possessed a pound less flesh, or had his flesh been other than the very best and most solid, it would have been reduced to a soft pulp, and every bone in his vertebrae broken. Meanwhile, never for one moment did the telephone relax its penetrating ting-ling-ling.

Strangling with his cough, beaten to a jelly by Strathley's powerful thumps, and irritated beyond endurance by that frightful ting-ling, Mr. Ayres' frame of mind can only be described by the word **murderous**.

He threw out his arms, motioning Strathley away, gasping, between lack of breath and indignation. But Hugh, mistaking the motion for a spasm, grasped Ayres by the shoulders, and, rais-

ing him to his feet, shook him vigorously, shouting :

“For God’s sake ! Ayres ! Man ! Don’t !” Until between the acme of his wrath and the general stirring up, induced by Strathley’s violent effort to recall him from the death he believed imminent, that miserable drop of champagne was removed from Mr. Ayres’ much-injured breathing medium.

Exhausted, but furious, that gentleman turned upon his unconscious tormentor.

“Damn it, loosen me, I tell you ! You’re a ——”

But Strathley gave him no chance to express his opinion, grasping his hand and calling out, delightedly, “Ayres, old boy ! Thank God you’re all right ! Thought you’d gone. All right, old fellow ? Eh ? All right ?”

His face so full of honest pleasure at Mr. Ayres’ deliverance from the trip to Hades, that angry as Ayres was, he could do nothing but mutter “D——f——” under his breath, as he sank into a chair for a moment’s rest, in the very worst temper he had ever experienced.

In their excitement, both gentlemen had forgotten the telephone, which had kept up its music



so untiringly that at last the office boy had opened the door of Mr. Ayres' private room and taken a peep through the crack. He had not seen Strathley's face, as he was at the moment shaking Ayres by the shoulder. But Ayres' expression was such, that the young inquirer immediately shrank away from his post of observation, giggling, as he said, "Jerusha, but the boss's mad! It's a jolly row, I wonder? They can't even hear the telephone! It's mad, too; been keeping it up fifteen minutes, good. Phew!" as the telephone gave a more vicious and persistent ting-ling-ling.

"Ting-ling-ling" it went, the boy giggling in the outer office.

"Ting-ling-ling," the telephone repeated, reiterated and reiterated, until at last it smote on Hugh Strathley's ears.

"Ayres," he said, with a short laugh, "I believe that thing's been keeping it up the whole time. Old boy," he went on, solicitously, bending anxiously over the exhausted and secretly enraged Ayres, "old boy, if you're able to have me leave you, I'll see who's at the other end of the telephone."

"Go to ——." Mr. Ayres shut his teeth to

keep back his behest, which was the consignment of his sincere but misguided friend to the company of that gentleman who is supposed to perambulate with hoofs and be decorated with horns.

Wishing so heartily that Hugh might go somewhere, anywhere out of his sight, that could Mr. Strathley have utilized mind reading, he would have been surprised at man's ingratitude.

It was just as well he could not see into Mr. Ayres' thoughts, for judging from Hugh's expression as his ear was fastened to the telephone, he was quite sufficiently surprised.

So surprised that his eyes, the ladies had always assured him were "so expressive," had a blank, idiotic stare.

He was positively losing his identity. Was a fool *de facto*! If there had been a doubt of it, it could no longer exist, for he was being assured of his condition by a very excited, albeit sweet voice.

"You're a fool, or you must think I am one," said the voice.

"Not at all," replied Hugh very softly. He had not intended this as an answer to the person at the other end of the line, but it seemed so out of place for a man to let a woman call herself a

fool and not put in a demurrer. He wished, however, he hadn't interfered with the lady, when quick, almost taking his breath away with their fierceness, rushed the words to his ear:

"Don't you dare contradict me, sir."

"No, ma'am," said Hugh, meekly and lower than before.

"What did you say?" called that excited voice. "Speak out! Speak out, I tell you! No mumbling! No mumbling!"

"The whole town shall know of this, sir."

"Of what?" exclaimed Hugh. And he thought of the Widow, that cold shiver running down his back. "I wonder if she wrote to any one else about me, Ayres?" He left the telephone, going over to his friend. "Do you suppose—"

"For the Lord's sake, leave me in peace," interrupted Mr. Ayres, who had not yet regained anything like composure. Adding impatiently as the telephone started off with its ting-ling; "I wish if you can't attend to that bell, you'd call the boy."

"Certainly. I'll attend to it," Hugh replied.

Mindful of the favor Ayres had sworn to do him, and most anxious to keep him good tempered, he hurried to the telephone where a warm reception



awaited him. The feminine voice raised to the highest soprano of indignation as it called :

“How dare you insult me sir, to leave me in the middle of a sentence? I’ll not stand it, sir.”

At this accusation Hugh was startled into his natural voice.

“Pray, pardon me,” he said. “I intended no insult;” when immediately over the telephone went a little scream; then came a short pause, and then, the voice in the sweetest tones.

“Pray, pardon me, sir; I thought you were my husband. Would you please send Mr. Ayres to the telephone.”

“Certainly;” and Hugh Strathley turned upon his friend a face of the deepest commiseration. “Ayres,” he said, in the solemn tone of one announcing the death of a near relation. “Ayres, I believe your — Mrs. Ayres is at the telephone, and wish — wishes you.”

“Why the — why didn’t you say so before?” exclaimed Ayres, impatiently.

At this moment nothing would have been so soothing to Herbert Ayres as the presence and sympathy of Mrs. Herbert A. Even a talk with her through a telephone would not have been so bad if he had had the room to himself.

But he hadn't, for on the hearth-rug, with a most serious face Hugh Strathley was meditating. Meditating on a most serious subject—matrimony. The little taste he had had of Mrs. Ayres' vehemence, and then her sudden relapse into sweetness when she learned she had not been abusing her husband, had given Hugh a shock.

Mrs. Ayres had always seemed such a delightful frank creature, now he began to wonder if all women were like her, tartars to their husbands, milk and honey to outsiders? Did all women practice that sort of hypocrisy?

And then he fell to speculating as to what he would do if the wife of his bosom were to call him "fool!" as the wife of Mr. Ayres' bosom had called him, becoming so absorbed as to his probable action in such a dilemma, that he overlooked the fact that at this moment Ayres was talking to Mrs. Ayres, and might, judging from that lady's fiery eloquence, have a reply to make to her, which he, Ayres, might not want Strathley to hear.

So entirely was Strathley absorbed in the possible future of the Strathley family when he should take unto himself a rib in the person of a Mrs. Hugh Strathley, that he entirely forgot the

Ayres' family. Mr. Ayres however had not forgotten him, mentally wishing him in Tophet as he twirled the telephone shouting "Hello!"

But Mrs. Ayres was not now the end man. It was another fellow who calmly told Mr. Ayres he would have to "wait until he could make connection."

Mr. Ayres, waiting with much outward patience and much inward impatience, was finally rewarded, and ting-ling-ling-ling-ed his bell for Mrs. Ayres.

"Wait," was all the lady vouchsafed in answer to his "Well, dear, what is it?"

He did wait as much, really as a half minute, then "Hello," he called, "Are you there?"

"Wait," repeated Mrs. Ayres.

"My dear," remonstrated Mr. Ayres, "we cannot keep the telephone wires to ourselves."

But Mrs. Ayres did not reply.

Ayres ting-linged persistently this time, answered by the man at the general office who assured him the connection was all right, whereupon Ayres very imprudently muttered "Damn it, I can't stand here forever," and the traitorous wires, willing to stir up family dissensions, carried the words right to Mrs. Ayres' little ear.

"Perhaps," she replied, with asperity, "You



can afford to wait a minute, since you kept me waiting two hours."

"Why, my dear," Mr. Ayres began, but Mrs. A. interrupted him with:

"Wasn't that Mr. Strathley you sent to answer me, sir?" and without waiting for a reply, "I know it was!" then tauntingly, "Couldn't answer your own wife. Nice thing, indeed." And then venomously, "I hate Hugh Strathley; I'll always hate him."

"My dear," again began Ayres. But this time the "dear" had considerable acrimony in it. Before he could finish the sentence, however, tap, tap, tap came to the door, and the office boy entering, said: "Both carriages is here, sir. Driver says as how you'll have to hurry to be in time for train."

Train! That fatal word, like dynamite, blew the contemplation of the future Mrs. Strathley clean out of Hugh's mind, which immediately became filled with the horrors of the present Mrs. Belling.

"Train! late! Ayres, come! You'll miss her!"

"I won't miss her," replied Ayres, speaking to Hugh, but in front of the telephone and over it flew the words.

"Won't miss who?" immediately inquired Mrs. Ayres.

"An old widow," replied Ayres, growing as cross as possible, and showing it in his voice as he asked: "Please tell me what you wanted of me."

"Whose widow?" inquired Mrs. Ayres.

Here Hugh, in the greatest anxiety, entered upon the family discussion.

"Ayres," he said, "I knew how it would be! Mrs. Ayres objects. But your oath, Ayres! You can't break that! Remember, you swore to meet her!"

"Oh, I'll meet her!" Again the telephone carried his words to his wife, who fairly cried her order: "You shan't meet her. I am your wife, sir; I have some rights, sir." Whereat, Mr. Ayres savagely rejoined: "I haven't time to waste." Mr. Ayres had never before spoken in this wise to his wife. At once repenting of it, he amended it with, "Tell me, dear, what you want me to do?"

"Come right home," unhesitatingly commanded his better half. But Mrs. Ayres had temporarily broken the reins that controlled her Bucephalus, for without a word Mr. Ayres put up the telephone. This was too much! To be strangled by champagne, thumped by his friend, and then

ordered home by his wife; and all for an old widow whom he wished—well, he wished had never been born.

At this moment the office boy again made his appearance with the words:

“Driver says, sir, as how’ll you’ll miss the train if—”

“Get out of here,” thundered Ayres. Snatching his hat, he strode out of the room, closely followed by Strathley. Each sprang into his carriage, and driving rapidly, reached the depot as the down-train steamed into Mulketawne.



## CHAPTER IV.

### “THE WIDOW ARRIVES.”

After the crowd had left the cars a lady appeared on the platform of the palace car. She was assisted down the steps by the conductor who held two satchels, and was followed by a maid, with a long-haired poodle in her arms.

The lady was large, very large. Completely shrouded in black with a heavy veil reaching very far down. She looked absolutely huge to Hugh Strathley, who muttering “O, my prophetic soul, the Widow,” moved off in the most cowardly manner, and left Mr. Ayres to his sacrifice, perfectly conscious of his meanness and saying, “Poor Ayres,” in deepest commiseration, as he looked to see if no one else would follow the Widow.

No one came, and feeling partly relieved, partly disappointed that Miss Belling was not here for him to welcome, he was about to leave the depot, when, as the conductor called “All aboard” a young woman ran out of the rear car, and giving a spring to the platform, would have fallen, if Strathley had not been near enough to steady her.

"I hope you are not hurt?" he asked, raising his hat.

But the girl, for now that he saw her face she did not look much else, had no time to say more than "Thanks," having to take a small basket from a boy who ran with it to her, barely catching the train as it moved out of the depot.

She was so fearful he'd miss his step, and so glad when from the platform he shouted back "Good luck" to her, that her whole body was moving with excitement. And her voice, calling "Thank you! thank you!" was so very agreeable that Strathley watched the little episode, interested as one generally is, in these bits of human nature.

"Nice voice, fresh, like her face," thought Strathley, as with the girl's excited movements, her basket, which she held by the cover, opened and out fell a couple of apples.

"Too bad she should lose them," thought Hugh.

Putting the thought into action, he started to follow one particularly fine apple that had just rolled by him, trying with his foot to stop the truant, but it obstinately gained velocity, and hurried along unmindful of the gentleman in pursuit, or of the young woman following him. "Pray don't

trouble yourself, sir," she called, and then she burst out laughing, for Hugh Strathley, thinking he had the apple within his grasp, stooped to pick it up as a porter passed with a trunk on his shoulder, who, not seeing the gentleman, and certainly not expecting gentlemen to be bending on the platform playing leapfrog, tumbled right over Strathley. Away went the trunk, porter and gentleman in a heap, and the girl laughing until tears came to her eyes.

They were such pretty eyes, though, so very brown, so very bright, and her teeth were so white as she laughed, that Hugh was not annoyed when, having relieved himself of the porter, he found her standing holding out her hand to help him up.

Springing to his feet, he took the hand nevertheless, releasing it instantly, however, as she spoke to him. "Please forgive me," she said. "I ought not to have laughed. But if you could have seen how funny you looked with the porter on top, and the apple fast in your hand. I'm sure I'm much obliged to you." And she took the apple. "I'll eat it right away. I've not tasted anything all day except one sandwich."

She bit into the fruit at once, eating like a hun-



gry school-girl, as Hugh brushed away the dust that covered him.

Suddenly with: "Oh, my purse! Great heavens! have I left it in the cars?" she threw away her apple, wrinkling her pretty brow, or as much of it as showed beneath her hat, while she anxiously searched through the little basket, upsetting another apple, which rolled away unheeded. Hugh with the greatest interest watching her anxious face, wishing, but not daring to offer her his purse, indeed, anything of his that she could utilize.

But there was something about the girl that forbade gallantry. She was so frank, so entirely unconscious of effect, so earnest in everything she did, that when at last, with the rosy hue first deepening in her cheeks and then paling, she turned to Hugh with a despairing:

"I've left my satchel in the cars with my purse in it. What shall I do? I've not a cent, and don't know a soul in town?" Hugh said with just the same feeling and manner he would have liked a man to have done to his sister, had he had one: "I wish you would let me lend you what you want."

"Really?" she asked. And then she shook

her head doubtfully. "You see," she went on, looking with her clear eyes straight into his. "I've worked for my living, I know what 'hard times' mean, and I've once or twice had favors done me, but never one that did not cost me dearly. Yet here, in this position, I am almost obliged to accept your kind offer, though I've often declared I'd never again take a favor." She spoke slowly, as if weighing his proposition. Then stopped, looked at Hugh seriously, almost severely, if so sweet a face could be severe, and then her expression changed, trustfulness came to her eyes.

"But," she said impulsively. "I don't believe you're of the sort I've generally met. I believe you're a gentleman." And she hesitated and then went on more quickly. "Really," with a little laugh, "my necessity forces me to accept your offer. Now," very seriously, "if you will let this be arranged in the most business-like manner, and you're not afraid to trust my honesty, or to take my note, I'll — I'll, I'll — I'll, borrow five dollars from you, sir."

"Certainly," said Hugh.

In a moment he had taken it from a roll of notes and handed it to her.

She blushed as she took the bill holding it in her hand, and then in a low voice said:

"I feel very uncomfortable in taking this from a stranger."

"Pray do not consider me a stranger," said Hugh quietly. "We are all of one human family. I've taken favors from others, and I'm sure I consider this so slight a one ———"

"Not to me," she replied "besides," blushing hotly, "I really could raise five dollars if I chose by pledging this."

She drew off her glove and showed Hugh a heavy plain gold ring on the third finger of her left hand.

Immediately Hugh was conscious of a sinking sensation toward the left side, where anatomists locate the heart. Though why any particular locality should be affected by a ring on the third finger of a stranger, Strathley could not tell, except, and this he believed solved the question, he was greatly affected that this young lady should, by her own acknowledgment, know so much of the hard side of life as the "pledging" of articles revealed.

Yet this could not have been the exact case, for while the girl's next words evidenced no less knowledge of difficulties, yet at them, Hugh's sinking sensation changed to exhilaration.



"I could raise money on that ring," said the girl looking at it. "but I don't want to part with it, not just yet. For, though I hate it, I detest it," stamping her foot, "yet I'll need it a little longer. So if you're not afraid to trust a stranger, and will take my note sir, I'll borrow this five dollar bill, and, and I'll prove to you I'm honest by paying it back as soon as possible."

She had not given him a chance to speak, and really he had had no idea what he could say, so that she might be convinced without offense, how very pleased he was to be of use to her. Yet now as she looked at him with some timidity, his words were not amiss.

"I will take your note, and I am perfectly sure of your honesty," he said.

"Thank you." She spoke now with a bright smile.

Just at this moment the sun, which had been about sinking, sent out some crimson beams, that resting upon the slender figure of the girl, glorified it. Hugh Strathley thought he had never seen anything so beautiful as this stranger, with brown hair, brown skin, and two of the loveliest brown eyes, as with a quiver of the lips she said:

"You're very kind. I've not had many to be

kind to me." And then with tears like diamonds shining, "you see your goodness makes a baby of me. Did you ever see such a goose?" She was quiet a moment, searching for something in the skirt of her dress. Giving it up with a little laugh. "I can't find my pocket," she said. "It's there, I put it in myself, but that bustle's too much for me. I'll have to ask you to lend me your pencil, and a slip of paper, that I may make out my note for the money."

Hugh had forgotten all about the note. Indeed, he had been so interested in her, that he had about forgotten everything else. But he would not have let her know this, so he handed her a pencil, tore a leaf from his note book, asked to be allowed to "hold the little basket" and then offered her his arm for "a writing desk."

She gave him the basket with "thank you," but declined his patent desk, saying "this will do better," and going to the end of the depot, where their chase after the apple had led them, she put the paper against the side of the building, writing in large irregular characters, that somehow seemed familiar to Hugh. At a little distance he looked over her shoulder, feeling so at home with her, that he was barely conscious of what he was

doing, until having commenced with — “Mulketawne, December 5th, 1887, I promise to pay——,” she turned her smiling face:

“What’s your name,” she asked.

Before he could answer, her eyes wandering from his, saw another face. Her expressions suddenly changed, her head rose erect, and with red lips curling scornfully, she crushed the paper in her hand, and faced some one who uttered a little scream and then the words: “What, you here!”

“Yes I’m here,” said the girl, growing red, and as beautiful as the sky before a storm.

Hugh turning to see the intruder, was surprised to find Mr. Ayres almost at his elbow, and beside him, the widow, Mrs. Jim Belling.

It was annoying for Ayres to have brought her here, and at this moment too. It was, to say the least, very annoying to be forced to meet that disagreeable old woman just now. Hugh only wished she were a man that he might knock her down for that impertinent stare at his friend, for somehow in this moment, with the large heavily draped widow, trying to “down” the girl who had so interested him, Hugh declared himself (mentally of course) forever her friend.



The girl, profoundly ignorant of this silent profession, felt that she stood alone, and was conscious of possible interpretations, for as the large woman in mourning said, with cold sarcasm, "I see you have utilized your time," she sprang a step farther from Hugh and, though defiant, she stood like a stag at bay, Hugh saw a quiver run over her entire body.

## CHAPTER V.

### "THE INTRODUCTIONS."

So greatly was he affected by this agitation on the part of his friend that it required all Hugh Strathley's self control to hold him quiet. He longed to fight, and as no one else was handy, glanced angrily at Ayres, who was literally looking daggers at him. But at Ayres' expression Strathley's vexation vanished. He had much ado to keep himself from bursting into laughter at the celerity with which her champion had tired of Jim Belling's widow. As it was, he shook with his repressed amusement, and holding the basket, just as its fair owner had done, by its cover, the last remaining apple fell out, rolling right under the Widow's gown, and, judging from her "Oh!" must have struck her foot.

"I beg pardon, Madam!" Hugh raised his hat, and then to the girl who had never removed her eyes from the Widow's face, "I trust you will forgive my having lost your last apple."

She made him no reply. She didn't even hear him, nor notice Mr. Ayres, her whole attention

absorbed by the Widow, who, Hugh saw even in the waning light, was one of those large, heavy blondes, called by courtesy "fine women."

The next moment he thought she was something more than fine, she was vicious, for the slight change in his manner from the formality with which he had asked her pardon, to his friendliness in alluding to the young lady's last apple, had not been lost upon her.

"Trust a designing widow for that," Hugh said to himself, as Mrs. Jim Belling put up her glasses, and first insolently surveying the girl, glanced at him, raised her shoulders with a "Pardon me! I did not know you were acquainted."

"If we are, is that anything to you?" asked the girl angrily, and then blushing crimson, "But I hate falsehoods; I won't tell them. No, we are not acquainted. We don't know each other's names, but I suppose any gentleman can render a courtesy to a lady."

"A lady!" Mrs. Belling's repetition of the younger woman's words was more offensive than anything Hugh had ever heard. It made his blood boil and evidently had the same effect on the girl.

"Stop your sneers," she spoke in a voice trem-



bling with anger. "I am more of a lady than you are, although I work for my living and you do not; I—" then she bit her lips, and less vehemently continued, "we had better keep family quarrels within the family."

"The family!" scornfully interposed the Widow.

"Yes, the family," said the girl, speaking now as coldly as the Widow had first spoken, and then wearily turning away from her. "But I don't care to talk any more to you."

With a vivid blush she looked at Hugh. "Sir," she said, "I would like to finish making out that paper."

"Certainly. Will you accept my arm to the ladies' room?"

Hugh offered his arm to her as if she were a duchess, and the two were about to walk away when Mr. Ayres interposed with:

"A moment, Strathley," bowing to the large blonde, he said; "*Miss Belling*, permit me to present Mr. Hugh Strathley, your brother's executor.

"*Miss Belling*," exclaimed Hugh, aghast, "Where's the Widow?"

The query slipping from him without his

knowledge, he was recalled to himself by the voice of the girl who had been charming him.

"I am the widow," she said almost fiercely. "*I am Mrs. Jim Belling! I am the unfortunate woman her brother married.*"

Hugh's breath came quick. To have said one of the mad things in his thoughts might have had serious consequences, and he was in no mood to consider consequences, for the girl, her frankness, her recklessness, her innate dignity, her outspoken anger, and above all, her forlorn position aroused his every spark of gallantry. Her poverty, too, which, since the approach of this elaborately gotten up woman was more apparent, made his pity the tenderest he had ever felt.

But he had no chance to express himself, for Miss Helen Belling, in the most effusive manner had taken his hand, and holding it fast in her's, seemed with her ample proportions, to hide him from Mrs. Belling, as she said, "Mr. Hugh Strathley, my dear brother's best friend," and pressed to her eyes a deeply black bordered handkerchief.

"Her brother's best friend!" exclaimed Eunice Belling. "Her brother's best friend," she repeated as if stunned. And then doubling up the

five dollar note into a ball threw it at Hugh with such good aim that it struck him in the face. "Take your money" she cried, "I'd rather starve than borrow it."

"O, don't!" he implored, starting toward her, when with a scream Miss Helen Belling fell fainting in his arms, and as she only weighed something less than a ton, all Hugh could do was to keep her from the ground, while he saw Ayres walk rapidly after the retreating figure of the Widow.

She was running as fast as she could run, crying, too, as if her heart would break.

Now there is something very provoking in having a person first outwalk one, and then break into a run. It is as much as to say that one is growing old or fat, or something one does not want to be.

At least, so Mr. Ayres thought, for when Eunice Belling began to run and rapidly increased the distance between them, he started off on a trot, putting on his best speed and holding his breath to make it last; he had the satisfaction of finding himself quite equal to the widow, which, as she was a good runner, gave Ayres peculiar satisfaction. He had not after all lost so much with his gain in years. Altogether running had



put him in a good humor. Indeed there is nothing like rapid motion, provided it be voluntary, for giving one a certain pleasant excitement which was now just what Mr. Ayres needed, for during the last few hours life's agreeable side had not been turned to Herbert Ayres.

He had been overpowered by Miss Belling's appearance, not admiring huge women, but having, with Hugh, set her down as the widow he had determined to make the best of it, although with such a woman, a maid and a poodle, he could hardly see any "best" to the affair. Still he had put on his most courtly air raising his hat and bowing in the most elegant manner as he had said:

"Allow me, Mrs. Belling to introduce myself as Herbert Ayres, a friend of your late husband's" and was relieved by the lady's reply,—as, drawing aside her veil and disclosing a florid and much powdered face, she had said with a smile:

"I am Miss Belling. Miss Helen Belling."

Miss Belling's face without a smile would not have been pleasing to Mr. Ayres who was rather fastidious about women, but at her smile he shuddered, for her mouth, to say the least, was not small, and her teeth were so gleamingly false that

Ayres involuntarily pitied Strathley, congratulating himself that he had not offered to espouse the cause of Miss Belling.

This thought brought to Mr. Ayres' mind the widow whom he had promised to befriend, and while he was not sure that Jim Belling's sole heir was friendly to the disinherited widow he saw no reason why she should be her enemy, so he hazarded an inquiry in a mild form.

"Miss Belling," he said, "I must ask your indulgence for my mistake, which occurred through Mr. Strathley's asking me to meet Mrs. Belling, reserving for himself the honor of meeting Miss Belling."

"Where is Mr. Strathley?" asked Miss Belling after making a proper acknowledgment of Mr. Ayres' speech, but ignoring the allusion to the Widow.

"Really I can not say. He was here a moment ago," replied Mr. Ayres looking around, commiserating Strathley, and willing to give him a respite. "If you will allow me to see you to your carriage I will send Mr. Strathley to you," he said, thinking he would meet Hugh and nerve him up to what he must, as executor, do well and handsomely.

"Is Mr. Strathley tall and dark?" asked Miss Belling, as Mr. Ayres thought irreverently, but he soon understood that the lady had a method in her madness, for with "Will you kindly walk this way? I think we will find him," Miss Belling led, Mr. Ayres following, the maid with the dog bringing up the rear, and after a short walk, Mr. Strathley was seen in the distance, standing beside a lady dressed in something dark and plain.

As Mr. Ayres had a nearer view of Strathley's companion and saw how very much interested the gentleman seemed, he grew very angry, for he felt he had been imposed upon, and no man likes that.

During the little controversy between Miss Helen Belling and the Widow, Mr. Ayres' sympathies had all been for Eunice. Her appearance possibly had something to do with this, for certainly the angry passion was more attractive, shining from bright brown eyes, than from the watery blue ones of Miss Belling.

And when in a desperate impulse Eunice had rushed away from the depot, Mr. Ayres following, he had lost none of his interest in her by the fact that she had a "neat foot and managed it well."

Yet not so well but that the gentleman's longer strides made him victor in the race, making him

generous, as victors generally are to the conquered, when breathless, Eunice stopped under a lamp post, and he saw that she was crying.

His kind heart forced him to offer any and all the assistance to her, not only because he had promised to champion her, but because she was a woman in distress. "I beg your pardon, Mrs. Belling, for presuming to follow you, but I knew your husband slightly, and hearing you were to arrive in Mulketawne too late to inform my wife," Ayres was slightly stretching it, "I took the liberty of going alone to the depot to meet you, and to, to—" He stopped, for the girl in a soft broken voice interrupted him.

"I thank you, sir, for your goodness to a stranger, and a most forlorn one. Why I came to this place I don't know. I can't explain it, except that I allowed myself to be governed by anger and revenge, for I can't do any thing to help myself, and there was no sense in my leaving Beloit. There at least I made enough to keep me from starving. Not that I can't do the same here," holding her hand proudly, and trying to look fiercely out of tearful eyes, as if he had expressed some doubt of her ability to work.

Then the knowledge that night was coming on,



that she didn't know a soul in town, and hadn't a penny in her pocket overcame her.

"I wish I were dead," she sobbed. "I never wished it before, though Heaven knows I have had enough to make me. But I do wish that I could drop dead this minute and end the whole business."

She covered her face with her hands, sobbing and crying heartily as a child.

What could a man do under the circumstances? Ayres was at his wits' end. If only Mrs. Ayres were with him! She would have put her arms about the forlorn stranger and have wept with her. That's just what Helen Ayres would have done. Her husband felt very much like doing it for her, but refrained, knowing that would not be the correct thing, even if the girl did look pitiful as she leaned against the lamp post and wept. O! if Helen Ayres were but here! In her absence all Mr. Ayres could do was to say,

"O pray don't! Mrs. Belling! If I can be of any service command me! I am an old married man, therefore you need not hesitate. I knew Mr. Belling very slightly." A barefaced lie, thrown in to give Mrs. Belling to understand that he had not been in any sympathy with her late

husband, whereas Ayres and the departed Jim had been quite "chummy."

But what man wouldn't lie about friendliness with the departed, when the injured widow is found to be a pretty impulsive creature who persists in sobbing in such hearty fashion that she would melt a heart of stone?

"O pray don't," implored Mr. Ayres adding "I do wish my wife were here!"

As Mr. Ayres uttered this wish, Mrs. Belling took her hands from her face and wet as it was with her streaming tears, turned it upon him.

She did not think of herself, did not know whether she looked ugly or pretty. She did look pretty, distractingly pretty, however: so pretty that when with a little sniff of her nice straight nose, her hands went off in a despairing effort to find her pocket, Mr. Ayres catching the words, "I can't get at my handkerchief," rose to the occasion, and immediately proffered his own spotless and delicately perfumed cambric.

"I'm sorry, but I must," she said apologetically, proceeding at once to use it in the heartiest fashion, "I'll wash it and give it back." And then in the frank manner that had so attracted Hugh Strathley, "I felt so miserable, sir, when that

woman spoke so meanly. I am awfully tired of fighting, yet I can't help striking back. I am so impulsive, and I was rude to him, but I couldn't help it when I found he was her friend. O! I have suffered from her and her brother."

She drew in her breath, continuing after a little pause, but much more quietly: "You wished for your wife, sir; that has put me at my ease. For I know a man does not allude to his wife before a stranger unless he believes her worthy of respect. And, sir, believe me, I do deserve respect, for I have never done anything worse than, because I am poor, to work for my living."

And it was a pathetic plea coming from this pretty woman to the rich, generous-hearted man. It gave him an impulse to take her home at once to his own wife. But, concluding he had better first mention it to the fair Helen, for at this moment there returned to him the memory of their disagreement over the telephone wire, accompanied by a slightly disagreeable sensation resembling fear, as the city clock struck six, and he knew his dinner hour had arrived. Under these circumstances he could not invite Mrs. Belling to visit Mrs. Ayres, who, while the loveliest of dispositions, might be, well, just a little cross. What.

then, could he do? For he would not leave her without being sure she was safe and comfortable, and now she was neither—even suffering; for under the light he noticed that she shivered with cold, and that her wrap was only a small jacket.

Again Ayres mentally wished for his wife, and then in her absence did the best he knew how to do, not so warmly or impulsively as some might have done, but kindly enough to start Eunice's tears afresh.

"Mrs. Belling," he said, "forgive my intruding on your private affairs, but I have heard the tenor of your husband's will. It is most unjust."

"I should say so." The words came from between Mrs. Belling's closed teeth.

"A most unjust will," Mr. Ayres went on. "Now you may be amply provided for the future, yet need a little present courtesy. If my wife were here she would know how to manage this, but in her absence may I, as I would wish a gentleman to act to Mrs. Ayres, may I offer you—" and then bluntly, "Now pray let me serve you in any way you desire."

She locked her hands together, looked up and down the street, shook her head, started to speak, caught her breath, and then—



“Sir, I must. It’s just like the handkerchief. I have to borrow or go to the station-house,” desperately, “for I’ve not one cent. I left my satchel and purse in the car. There was not much money in it, but enough to have kept me until I could find work.”

“Will you allow me to lend you some money?” He took out a roll of bills.

“I will borrow just one dollar,” she said, “and to-morrow I’ll try to find some work.”

Work! Poor little soul, how he pitied her, even as he admired her sturdy independence.

“Are you obliged to work, Mrs. Belling?” he asked.

“I’ve done little else,” she said bitterly, and then bravely, “But I don’t mind work. There are lots of things worse than work, and I’m so quick with the Caligraph, understand stenography too, that I always manage to get along.”

“Are you quick with typewriting? Why, then I can give you a position at once.”

“Regular work?” she asked.

“Yes,” he replied.

“O thank you!” she caught his hand in her two cold ones, and though they were so cold that Mr. Ayres felt the chill through his kids, yet it was

not an unpleasant chill, the hands having in them so much of the woman's impetuous nature that their grasp was quite agreeable. So between their quick pressure, the loan of the handkerchief, and the pleasure of doing a kindness, Mr. Ayres felt so friendly that he offered Mrs. Belling his arm, told her to be sure to be at the office of the Consolidated Milling Company at eight to-morrow morning, and then saying he knew just the place where she could be comfortably lodged, for the present at least, off they started, chatting just like old friends as they passed a deep doorway that held something besides shadows.

What that doorway held was a small and very elegantly attired lady, who, as the couple passed, followed them at a little distance. Having about her a certain air and carriage that even in the growing darkness made her noticeable, the few pedestrians turned to look at her. Every time one did so the lady trembled with fear, yet she kept on, following Mr. Ayres and Mrs. Belling, occasionally letting fall such words as "the villain," "wretch," "I'll make him pay for this," until the two entered a gate leading through a snow covered garden to a small frame house.

Behind a tree the elegant little lady heard Mr.

Ayres rap at the door, which was opened by a tall old woman who looked over her spectacles, exclaiming, "Law sakes alive, is it you, Mr. Ayres?" Then Mr. Ayres said something which the lady behind the tree could not hear, but she did hear the old lady reply—

"On your recommend I'd take in most any one."

There was a little further conversation, then Mr. Ayres called, "Good night, I must hurry home." Whereat the lady behind the tree whispered, "Villain! I think you'd better," thus missing the old lady's request, that Mr. Ayres would give her "best respects to your wife," and Mr. Ayres' reply, "With pleasure," as hurrying past the tree which hid the lady he strode off in the same direction that was taken by the lady herself, who, by a different street, ran as fast as two very delicately shod feet could carry her toward a fine large mansion that over-topped the smaller houses about it.

## CHAPTER VI.

### "MR. AND MRS. AYRES AT HOME."

Being much the better pedestrain, Mr. Ayres arrived first, whistling as he opened the handsome iron gate and walked up the pathway to the handsome house from whose windows streamed the bright light of his home.

"Dear little soul!" he said, thinking of his wife. "What was the matter with her to-day? I fear I was a brute to have felt even a moment's anger. But she'll be all right by now. She'll enjoy Strathley's making such a fool of himself, and how nicely he was paid off! With that great woman lying like a load of lead on his breast. And the Widow! The poor, little Widow! I'll wager she has a friend in Helen Ayres!"

With which words Mr. Ayres ascended the broad steps passed the handsome porch, and opening the front door, entered into the elegant abode, that, his own, gave him a sense of comfortable pride as he stood at the foot of the finely carved stairway and called:

"Pretty!" his pet name for his wife.



She didn't answer.

"Pretty!"

He called louder this time, and receiving no answer, seeing nothing of the Helen of his love, he ran lightly up to the second story, passing through the elegant suite of bedroom, dressing room, and sitting room, which had been adorned for the occupancy of Mrs. Herbert Ayres. But, in perfect order, sweet with the perfume of growing plants, Helen herself, fairest flower of all, was not to be found.

"The deuce!" exclaimed Mr. Ayres as on the mantle of the sitting room the clock struck seven.

"The deuce! An hour after dinner and not home! Some of those darned teas! Keeping a fellow waiting to see his wife, and hungry for his dinner."

He walked down stairs through the parlor, the dining room, growing more impatient, and with all his goodness of disposition, a little cross.

"I'm darned if I stand much more of this," he said. "Stopping to entertain a lot of women who'd better be at home looking after their husband's comfort——"

He ceased his grumbling as he heard a sleigh stop before the house, opening the door for his

wife, listening for her voice. But no wife, no voice, only the driver sitting like a wooden man, as if ordered to drive Mrs. Ayres to some entertainment. Yet it was too early for that! What did it mean? Concluding he might as well know why Pat was at the door at this hour and, not in the best of humors, Herbert Ayres, bareheaded, walked to the gate.

“Why did you come here at seven?” he asked, as Pat said “Good heaven sorr!”

“An thin, sorr, yer Honer, I didn’t know where ilse ter go! the Missus sez, sez she, ‘Pat be quick,’ thim waz her worrds. An’ whin I comed roun’ I foun’ the Missus at the gate. ‘Ter the offus,’ sez she, ‘Quick.’ Ter the offus we wint flyin’. A minit lather down the stips runs the Missus.

“‘Patrick ‘sez she, ter the thrain, quick.’ An quick sorr it was. ‘Wait Pathrick’ sez she, ‘right thair.’ An’ wait I did, till the thrain fer Chicago wint out, an’ anither from the Michigan Central came in. An’ thin, it growin’ darker an’ darker, an’ no sign of the Missus, sez I to mesilf, Pathrick—well sorr, yer honer, shure I didn’t know what ter say, but as the poor bastes af horsis was jist shtarvin’ wid hunger, I jist let them gintly hav their own way, an’ thin the can-

ning cratures jist hided for home. So I thought as may be I'd see yer honer, an' ask what I might do?"

"Ask me? Go right back and wait for your mistress. How dare you disobey her! Wait until doomsday if she tells you!"

"Ach thin sorr I'd be the sorry man, wid thim poor cratures winnowing fer ther oats, to say nothin' af me shtarvin' wid emptiness. But if yer honer sez—"

"Go" ordered Mr. Ayres. And then, "Wait, I'll go with you."

"All right sorr," said Pat, his master hurrying up to the house for his hat, somewhat worried over the absence of Mrs. Ayres.

"Where can she be? Out on foot! alone! at this hour!"

It wasn't such a terrible hour for a lady to be out and on foot. Many lovely women are compelled to brave worse dangers. But then they were not Mrs. Ayres, the cherished, whose lightest wishes were commands! Where could she have gone? What had happened? Mr. Ayres was becoming anxious, very anxious, especially as the last words his wife had called through the telephone came back to him.

"Come home at once," she had said, and he had been annoyed. But perhaps she had needed him! Could she have been sick?

If she had been sick she would have summoned a doctor, and some one else would have summoned him. Had she expected any one by the train?

But he had been at the depot, and he had seen nothing of Mrs. Ayres.

Yet she must have wanted her husband, for she had gone to the office. Considering all these pros and cons, Mr. Ayres decided that before going in search of Mrs. Ayres he would question Mary, his wife's maid.

Mary answered his bell.

A tall, angular woman of middle age, rather sour of face, but so devoted to her mistress whom she had nursed in infancy, that in the Ayres' household she was a power. To-day Mary seemed even less amiable than usual as she replied to Mr. Ayres' questions, giving as little information as possible, which Mary generally managed to do.

"Mary, do you know where Mrs. Ayres intended to go?" asked Mr. Ayres.

"Not every place sir," answered Mary.

"Do you know any place?"

"Yes, sir."



“Where?”

“To your office.”

“Did she say what she wanted?”

“I didn’t ask her, sir.”

This was very provoking, for Mr. Ayres knew that Mary need never ask any questions of Mrs. Ayres, who generally told her her every thought, and Mary knew that he knew this. Yet she volunteered no information.

Mr. Ayres would not stoop to question farther on this tack, so he tried another.

“Did you know she called for me this afternoon?” he asked.

“Yes, sir,” replied Mary.

“Do you know what Mrs. Ayres wanted?”

“Mrs. Ayres wanted you, sir.”

Mary was exasperating. But unmoved, her dark hair smoothed down at the side of her face and knotted tightly at the back, she was as impervious as usual to everything and every one, but her mistress.

Mr. Ayres looked at his wife’s maid, doing a little private swearing.

Mrs. Ayres’ maid looked straight before her apparently doing nothing, yet she must have been listening very intently, for when Mr. Ayres said: “In case Mrs. Ayres returns in my absence tell

her I have gone to the depot to meet her." Mary saying in the low, monotonous tone, which was her usual mode of articulating words:

"Here is Mrs. Ayres," opened the door as her mistress ran up the steps to the piazza.

Seeing her faithful maid, Mrs. Ayres threw herself in her arms, as she had done when a child.

"O, Mary!" she exclaimed, "Mary, Mary, Mary," in different tones of woe, clinging to Mary's neck very much as a child would have clung. Treated as a child too, for Mary lifted her off the floor whispering: "Shush! my dear little missey! my dear girlie," in such soft tones that no one heard her except the lady she so affectionately addressed. As for Mr. Ayres, he was stunned at his wife's appearance, as pale and generally bedraggled, she had for a moment stood in the light before being hidden in Mary's arms.

What was the cause of this agitation?

Had Mrs. Ayres had bad news?

If so, his was the right to comfort her, and not a servant.

"Stand aside, Mary!" he said.

Not daring to disobey Mary put her mistress on

her feet, and, stepping back, was moving away, when Mrs. Ayres said:

“ Mary, stop just where you are!” brought the maid to a stand, with a dogged expression that told Mr. Ayres, or any other man it might concern, that she’d—well she’d stand where Mrs. Ayres bid her, if the whole earth crumbled.

Mr. Ayres did not trouble himself about Mary’s expression. Both of his eyes had as much as they could do to observe his wife. In fact, if he had possessed as many eyes as the much-seeing Janus, they would all have been fully occupied in observing the extraordinary attitude of the fairy like creature he had not very long ago declared the most amiable of her sex.

He almost doubted his senses; felt like biting his finger to be sure he was himself, or somebody else. Could he be Herbert Ayres? Or was he a roaring lion, to call such an expression upon Mrs. Ayres’ excessively pretty face?

“ Why my dear——” he began, innocence and amazement struggling for mastery, as Mrs. Ayres, drawn up to the very tip top of her five feet two inches, held back her fair face, turned up her delicate nose, curved her pink lips, and glared, actually glared, with her angelic blue eyes.

The only unchanged thing about her was the soft, silky, baby blonde hair, that lay on her forehead in the tiniest curly rings.

“Why my dear,” repeated her husband. “What is the matter?”

“Matter!” she cried and stamping her feet that he had always told her Venus would envy, stamping those tiny feet, first one and then the other, until the chandelier jingled, she called as loud as she could:

“Don’t you dare to speak to me;” gave a hysterical sob, and crying “Mary, Mary” fell into Mary’s outstretched arms.



## CHAPTER VII.

“DINNER IS SERVED SINGLY.”

To see his wife hysterical was an infliction on good nature, but that in this condition from some perfectly inexplicable cause, she should vent her excitement upon him and like an abused creature throw herself on a servant's breast seeking refuge from her husband! It was almost more than man could bear. Ayres' first impulse, rage, he restrained as unworthy of a gentleman. He was, besides, sincerely fond of his Helen, ready to overlook any fault, for, during the six years of their married life, she had proven such a loving and lovable being. It is true that once or twice, about things that seemed trivial, such as a pair of tight shoes, and a new bonnet, she had demonstrated the fact that somewhere within her charming anatomy, there was hidden a temper.

But the little outburst had lasted but a moment or so, and she had so readily returned to sunshine and sweetness, that he had rather enjoyed the episodes.

This however was a different matter.

This was something serious.

And before a servant!

What man likes to be belittled before his hired help? Yet Mr. Ayres could not say a cross word. Mrs. Ayres was so small, so fair! She really seemed hardly more than a child, as her blonde head hung over Mary's shoulder, while that devoted female bore her aloft, whence there reached Herbert Ayres the subdued tones of a first-class fit of hysterics, making him too anxious to follow his judgment, and leave the house so that Mrs. Ayres might be able to test a salutary dose of absence. He could not leave the house while Helen was crying. He had heard hysterics were dangerous. Thus he could do nothing but wait the outcome, very wisely determining that he had better remain below stairs, at least for the present, and have dinner served as if Mrs. Ayres had a slight attack of indisposition, thus giving no chance for gossip to the servants.

So Mr. Ayres walked into the dining room, ordered dinner, and taking up the evening paper, informed the maid that Mrs. Ayres would not come to the table, and that dinner was to be served to one.

"Your mistress is not well," he said, barely tasting the soup and fish.

But when the partridges were set before him, remembering his Helen's affection for this particular bird, especially when landed as now, he directed that "One of the birds be sent to Mrs. Ayres' room." When being informed that "Mary had taken up Mrs. Ayres' dinner," he grew savage, and immediately found his lost appetite.

Wasn't it enough to make a man savage? First to come home and have no wife to meet him, then, starting off in anxious quest, to have her meet him with a vengeance? Screeching like mad, and insulting him before a servant! And then, worse and more of it, while he was forcing down a mouthful in order to stop wagging tongues, she, encouraged in every stupidity by that malicious old woman was enjoying her dinner upstairs! By such considerations brought to his "feed," Herbert Ayres deliberately enjoyed his pudding, drank his coffee, managed a bit of cheese, and then with his stomach fortified, was at peace with the world, ready — even to forgive his wife.

From the dining-room he walked through the parlors, intending to amuse himself. But while Mrs. Ayres certainly was not bulky, she filled a good deal of space and without her fair presence, the parlors were but wastes of damask, laces and

bric-a-brac. Such wastes that Mr. Ayres, not being able to endure them, walked across the hall to the little room called his "den," which, perhaps for the reason it was his, Mrs. Ayres had appropriated.

There were her blue quilted slippers, snuggling up to his. Such cunning mites of things! And her work basket, with the piece of embroidery begun six years ago, on their wedding day, when she had started out "to be industrious." Her husband took up the gold thimble, trying to put it on his little finger, but the finger was far too large, so the thimble sat on its tip, like a yellow cap. Then Mr. Ayres turned him about, sighing, somewhat weary of the stillness, when seeing the telephone his mind again reverted to Mrs. Ayres' "Come home at once," and he decided he'd go up to her, and have the riddle solved as to what she had desired, and at the same time impress upon her that man being the dominant spirit, must be besought, not ordered.

Secretly glad of an excuse to talk with her without running the risk of compromising his dignity, Mr. Ayres mounted the stairway and entered into the charming apartment, called Mrs. Ayres' sitting room, whence a door opening into the large



bedroom gave him a good view of a pretty and amusing picture.

On a sofa, propped up by blue satin cushions, the fair Helen was gracefully eating in the most comfortable manner, what, judging by the empty dishes on the tray near by, must have been a hearty meal.

Just now, she was coquetting with her food, holding a slip of partridge breast in one hand, and a glass of champagne in the other, and with her golden hair rolled up on the top of her head, robed in a ravishing blue wrapper, was dilating to Mary upon her woes.

“Who would have thought Mary,” she said, sipping her wine, “that he was a perjured villain?”

The contrast between Mrs. Ayres sentiments and her occupation was so comical that Mr. Ayres had as much as he could do to restrain laughter. Knowing that would never answer, and unwilling to disturb Mrs. Ayres’ dinner, her husband took a chair just outside of the doorway, expecting every moment that she would turn and bid him enter into the room and her softened heart.

Just now, however, between the partridge, the champagne and Mary’s servile devotion, the little

lady was too fully occupied to look about her as she sighed, repeating with animation, "A perjured villain!" and then with a little snap at the partridge, speaking with her mouth full: "I hate him!" Then she took a good sip of the wine, and gave a doleful shake of her pretty head. "Ah Mary!" she exclaimed philosophically, "how little we can tell the future."

"Little indeed, my deary," echoed Mary.

"When I went to that beastly little telephone full of joy, did I imagine my happiness was to be shattered?"

"Indeed not, my lamby!" responded Mary.

"And to think I should have said all those cross things to Mr. Strathley; why he'll think me bad tempered, I know it was he: I recognized his voice. He'll think I'm a virago."

"O no! He couldn't, he's not a fool," for now Mary ventured to disagree with her mistress. But when Mrs. Ayres biting at the partridge, and taking a sip of the wine declared:

"He is a fool! All men are!" Mary again fell to servility and echoed:

"So they are, deary."

"I hope I shall *never* see him again," said Mrs. Ayres, "for I shall always be thinking he is

thinking of what I called him. I used to like him too, especially since he sent me that last bearskin. It's a beauty, isn't it Mary?"

"Yes indeed, lamby."

"But now I hate it, and him too, and—and every one but you, Mary. I believe I'll just die, and then perhaps Herbert Ayres'll be sorry. O! O!"

And screwing up her lovely eyes, Mrs. Ayres tried very hard to cry, as her husband, believing another attack of hysterics imminent, and tired waiting for Mrs. Ayres' notice, thought he'd force himself upon the little lady's attention.

As for Mary, she should be dismissed! Mr. Ayres thought this so determinedly that he absolutely fooled himself into believing he really meant it, although he well knew he'd never dream of doing anything to interfere with Mrs. Ayres' comfort, any more than he would sacrifice her soft blonde bangs, or in any way belittle her beauty.

But so well did he humbug himself, that when he stood in the doorway and said, "Mrs. Ayres, I should like a few moments of your time," he looked so angry that he actually humbugged Mrs. Ayres, and Mary too.

The fair Helen screamed, sprang to her feet, for a moment meditated flight, and then, trying to hold herself as high as she had done when she had first met Mr. Ayres in the hall, she became painfully conscious that her boots, removed by the devoted Mary, had taken off with them a good inch of her majestic stature.

Mary stood her ground.

Startled as she had been by her master's sudden apparition, she didn't care for him; no, not for anyone but her "kamby," whom, with a dogged expression in her eyes, she determined to protect at all costs.

Mr. Ayres became really angry. But the pretty picture of Helen, with outstretched hands holding tightly in one the glass of champagne, in the other a piece of partridge, was so provocative of laughter, that again he had to battle hard to subdue his inclinations, until Mary, the objectionate, could be gotten rid of: so with a frown he said:

"Leave the room, Mary."

"Whereat Mrs. Ayres instantly followed with:

"Stay where you are, Mary;" and becoming conscious of her undignified clinging to meat and drink, with an exclamation, flung from her both partridge and glass.



She tried to regain her position of injured wifehood and just rage, but somehow the wine and partridge seemed so funny even to her, that a smile began to dimple the corners of her mouth.

Whereat Mr. Ayres burst into laughter, threw himself into a chair, and saying:

"Helen Ayres, you are the most ridiculous baby in the world," held out his arms to her.

To be called a baby might have been endured, but to be called ridiculous! Mrs. Ayres rose to the demand.

"Sir!" she said, "you may think it ridiculous to injure, but I do not, to be injured. You are a perfidious wretch," she went on, working herself into a rage. "Don't ever speak to me again! Go to her, sir! Her! Do you hear? I saw you, sir—Oh! oh! I shall leave your house this minute," and with blue wrapper, bare feet and all, Mrs. Ayres made for the door as if about to dash right through it, slowing up slightly, however, so as not to lose what her husband was saying.

"So you intend to leave this house, Mrs. Ayres, which allow me to remind you is yours, your wedding gift," Mr. Ayres slightly emphasized the word wedding. "I shall not seek to detain you. If, however, you will accept the suggestion that since I

am dressed, and you are not, I had better be the one that go; I will be pleased to free you from my presence at once.

He rose as he spoke, but Mrs. Ayres, saying, "Mary, wait in the kitchen for my bell," slammed the door after Mary's exit, and then standing in front of it, opposed a lovely obstruction to Mr. Ayres' future motion.

"You shan't go," she said. "You shall explain to me, sir."

"Certainly," replied her husband. "What do you want explained?"

"That's like a man," said Mrs. Ayres scornfully. "You're afraid of committing yourself, sir! I want everything explained. *Everything.*"

"If you'd only intimate where I am to begin," Mr. Ayres came perilously near to laughter when Mrs. Ayres said:

"I won't intimate, I want to know everything."

"So you shall." Then Mr. Ayres tried to think what he should say. "Do you want to know why I didn't come home when you called?" he asked.

"Certainly," replied Mrs. Ayres, curiosity struggling with dignity.

"Well, if you must know, I thought you spoke

in an unbecoming manner. In fact, Helen, a man does not like to be ordered about."

"O! of course not," taunted Mrs. Ayres. "Not by his wife; any other woman though, and it's all right."

"No other woman would try it on me," said Mr. Ayres very proudly.

"She did;" said Mrs. Ayres. "I saw her run away and you run after her."

"O, you mean Mrs. Belling! Poor thing," said Mr. Ayres, his calmness under the accusation exasperating his wife.

"Yes! Poor thing," she sneered. "You can pity her, but you did not pity me when I ran after you, my heart almost breaking."

"Well, my dear, if you will persist in making a goose of yourself."

"I did not make a goose of myself," interposed Mrs. Ayres.

"Who did, then?" asked her husband, his eyes twinkling.

"You did," said Helen.

"Why did you let me!" asked Herbert.

"I didn't", said Mrs. Ayres. Then feeling that the conversation was becoming frivolous, and that she was not gaining information or satisfac-

tion either, Mrs. Ayres said, with a manner of a queen or what she thought was queenly :

“ Mr. Ayres, I would like to know who was that creature talking to you under the gaslight ? ”

“ That was Mrs. Jim Belling, a very much injured woman whom I have said I would befriend. ”

“ *You* befriend ! ” exclaimed Mrs. Ayres, amazed. And then growing rosy and angry. “ And pray, sir, what right have you, a married man, to go about befriending women ? I do declare ! This is too much. I—I—didn’t, didn’t suppose you’d—you’d dare to avow this to my eye, fac-face-ace, ” and dissolved into tears Mrs. Ayres rolled herself into a ball, and fell sobbing into a great chair.

“ Why, my dear child, ” said her husband, “ pray don’t be so silly.

Nothing but sobs from Mrs. Ayres.

“ You’ll make yourself ill, Helen. ”

Sobs, more violent from Mrs. Ayres.

“ My dear Helen. ”

Sobs most violent.

“ Why— ” a blank surprise on the part of Mr. Ayres to whose mind Mr. Strathley’s doubt of Mrs. Ayres’ approval of his championing a woman recurred forcibly.

“ Helen. ”



Very softly, when Mrs. Ayres grief had become less demonstrative, "this is very foolish of you."

No reply.

"Mrs. Belling is nothing to me."

"I don't believe you," in smothered tones from Mrs. Ayres, and a really delightful sense of pleasure began to dawn over Mr. Ayres' vexation, as he realized that unreasonable and silly as she was, it was nice that this lovely young creature loved him enough to be jealous of him.

"You see, my dear," said Mr. Ayres, "you're the only woman in the world to me, but this poor creature.——"

"She's young and pretty," Mrs. Ayres' smothered voice interposed.

"Is she?" said her husband, concealing the fact that he had arrived at the same conclusion.

"Yes, she is," reiterated Mrs. Ayres.

"Well, dear," said Mr. Ayres, "she's poor, has to work for her living, so I, having to please Strathley agreed to meet her at the depot; in finding her poverty a fact, took her to lodge with old Mrs. Jones, and gave her the position of typewriter for the company. I was foolish enough to believe, Helen, that you would be pleased to know I had been of use to one of the women whom you are always championing."

"Mr. Ayres," Mrs. Ayres was coldly dignified, not a trace left of her tears, but the prettiest reddening of her eyes and nose. "You are very different from me, sir; you are a man, I am a woman."

Mr. Ayres was aware of that.

"I can champion all the women in the world, sir, but you can not."

Mr. Ayres didn't wish to.

"No," Mrs. Ayres grew venomous: "you want *one*, only one, sir."

Mrs. Ayres was quite right. Mr. Ayres had found one quite enough for him.

"I take your taunt, sir," replied the majestic being of five feet, shorn of her heels, alas! That was the limit of Mrs. Ayres' height. Still she stretched out that height tremendously as she spoke.

"I take your taunt, sir, but I insist that that creature be dismissed at once. At once. Do you hear!"

"My dear wife," Mrs. Ayres interrupted with:

"Don't you 'dear me,' sir."

"Well, then, my cheap wife."

"Mr. Ayres, unless you behave with more respect, sir, I'll—I'll—I'll just open that window and scream murder, sir."

She ran to the window looking as if she meant what she said.

Mr. Ayres instantly became serious.

Alone, he was willing to do anything and everything to conciliate his Helen, but he wanted no witnesses to this little tantrum which, to tell the truth, had lasted long enough to tire him.

"Mrs. Ayres," he said quietly, "I regret, if in this act of kindness to the widow of a man I once liked, I have displeased you. I regret still more that you have shown such an unkind spirit toward your own sex, but, as I have given Mrs. Belling a situation, I cannot take it away without cause. I will not, even to please you, be so unjust."

Then in the coolest and most aggravating manner Mr. Ayres made his preparations for bed. Entering therewith, and apparently falling asleep, as if in the happiest frame of mind, while Mrs. Ayres, very angry and wide awake, sat cuddled in the great chair. Presently she heard a little scratch, scratch, scratch, and looking saw a tiny creature run across the carpet. Small as it was, it struck terror into the lady's soul.

Oh for Mary.

But the bell was just where that awful beast.

still and watchful, was bobbing its little ears and listening for a sound.

What could Mrs. Ayres do? How escape?

When Oh, horror! the bright-eyed monster coming her way, the lady uttered a wild shriek, and giving a leap, landed on the bed in her husband's arms.

"Why! darling! what is it? A burglar?" he asked.

"A burglar!" she replied with scorn, "No sir, it is a mouse!"



## CHAPTER VIII.

### "WITH THE JONESES."

While Mr. and Mrs. Ayres were sailing on the sea of marital argument, the Widow herself had found a safe harbor.

It might not have been an attractive haven to a more fastidious person, but as Hugh Strathley said, "It's the way we look at things."

Thus the neat, though somewhat bare sitting room into which, at Mr. Ayres' departure, Mrs. Jones ushered Eunice Belling, was a place of rest to that tired young woman. For that the Widow was young, had been decided by the law of *vox populi*. Hugh Strathley so thought, Ayres followed suit, Mrs. Ayres indignantly declared it, and, as climax, Mrs. Jones, looking over her spectacles, said to a man sitting in the corner by the fire:

"Jim, here's Mrs. Belling, type writer to the company—goes to work to-morrow morning. She's young for a widdy, ain't she, Jim?"

So Eunice must be young, or at least look

young, which is the equivalent, according to the French.

Whatever people might think of her, Eunice did her own thinking about them. As she bowed and said, "Good evening, sir," to him, Mrs. Jones called, "Jim," Eunice decided he must, when he stood up, be a huge man, for as he leaned back in one chair with his feet occupying another, he seemed to cover one-third of the room. His face matching his body in size, was light, in a colorless way, with heavy features and without beard, having even on the head very little hair. This little matched the light skin, and, quite worn away on top, made him of suitable age to be the husband of the spry old lady, whose white cap with black strings streaming, only partly concealed her dark hair.

"Young for a widdy, ain't she, Jim?"

As Mrs. Jones, in repeating this, spoke very loud, Eunice concluded the tall man must be deaf, and again saluted him, shouting this time:

"Good evening, sir."

He nodded his head, the one nod serving as answer to Mrs. Jones, and acknowledgment to Eunice; then held his newspaper up higher, so that his face was covered. Eunice and Mrs.

Jones sitting near together fell into conversation, which Mrs. Jones opened by a bit of personal information, that stopped all surmises as to her relations with the great silent man.

"Law sakes alive!" said Mrs. Jones, talking now in her natural voice, "don't mind Jim, he was allus so from a boy, never seen anything in a gal ter look at. Jest don't care nothin' fer any gal but me his mother, and a good son he hez been ter an ignorant ole woman like me, and him so wise. Jest a readin' all the time! Why his larnin' is wonderful. There ain't no case o' measles or fever in town, but Jim knows jest when it sot in an when it ended, an' never an advertisement but he ken tell it backwards. 'Taint no use fer me to be puttin' out my eyes readin' the daily newses, Jim knows em all. As for figgers! Law, sakes alive, but he ken run em up faster'n I ken drop stitches. Up ter the office he is allus bein' called on ter put some figgers right. Sometimes he hez so many in his head that they jest spills out, and runs over, then he calls em out loud. So don't be afeared if you hears him, jest be sure it's Jim, an' nobody ken come anigh us, ter hurt us as long's Jim's in the house. He was allus so from a boy, allus run ter figgers, and allus jest so good. The best boy

ter look arter little boys. Him and Hugh Strathley was ter school together. That's how Jim took the place up to offus. He know'd Hugh'd need a clear head fer figgers. Hugh's nothin' ter Jim in figgers," with sublime pity for Hugh, "but I allus hez said thar ain't but one Jim, an' he's Jim Jones."

Eunice, whose heart had begun beating at the name of Hugh Strathley, which heard' but once, she could not forget, at the close of Mrs. Jones' peroration glanced at the wonderful Jim, and started to find his eyes, held just above the edge of the paper, were fixed upon her.

Small, dark and sharp, those eyes gave quite a different expression to Jim's face, that before had been simply heavy. As soon however as she looked at him, Jim Jones buried his face again in the newspaper, and Eunice feared she had offended him.

There was a moment of uncomfortable quiet, for Mrs. Jones had slipped out of the room.

When she popped her head in the door with: "I was thinkin' that p'raps you'd like a cup o'tea," Eunice's "O thank you." was supplemented by "please may I help you."

"Well lawk sakes alive," said Mrs. Jones, "ef



yer wants ter," and Eunice was glad to leave the deaf Jim to his paper.

In the kitchen, neat as a new pin, Eunice made herself so useful, that Mrs. Jones, after carefully measuring out the tea, sat down laughing as she said, "Wal yer is curious! yer jest waits on me as if I'd been used ter playin' lady."

She liked it though, who does not like kind attention? and when Eunice had placed two cups at one end of the snowy pine table, Mrs. Jones had quite decided, and so declared: "thet Eunice," (for Eunice after the first cup of tea had asked to be called by her first name, saying she hated "Mrs. Belling"), "thet Eunice was about the likeliest gal in the hull toun o' Mulketawne, an' thet she, Mrs. Jones, was uncommon glad she'd come."

All of which was like manna to Eunice's lonely heart. So grateful was she for the old widow's kind feeling that she did not tire when Mrs. Jones, drinking deeper and deeper of the tea, took up the praise of "Jim Jones."

"Lawk sakes alive. Eunice, when yer jest knows him as I does! He is the wonderfulest lad yer ever seen, never no more trouble nor a baby. Takin' what I gives him, never complainin' or grumblin'. Bringing home his money, and mak-

in' a fair divide, jest a fixin' things ekal fer me, who did hev' a kinder hard time when I was young. But lawk sakes alive! It's all over now, and what I sez is, that what's over an' well over, is over fer good. But it's a comfort havin' a woman roun', an' I hez taken an uncommon shine ter yer. Yer aint got no chillern?" asked Mrs. Jones desiring now to learn something more about her lodger.

"No," replied Eunice.

"Ain't never had none?"

"No."

"It's an orful pity," said Mrs. Jones. "Ef now yer'd only had a son like my Jim! Sech a friend fer a widdy to hav!"

Eunice did not reply.

Old memories were stirring, her eyes filling, and her cheeks hot, her voice almost failing as Mrs. Jones continued her investigations with:

"But p'r'aps yer ain't a widdy like me! P'r'aps yer hez had an easy time."

"No," said Eunice. "I have not had an easy time."

"No! An' yer sech a purty gal, fer with yer hat off, I never could see no good in them hats a hiddin' a gal's forrid, now with yer hat off, an' them little quirley-kews 'round yer forrid, yer is downright purty."

Eunice made no reply ! She had grown bitter, was thinking how little good her looks or her actions had brought her, and, as life had taught her to look at results, she did not believe appearances were of any benefit.

Still it is probable she was not sorry the old lady called her "purty," and said her hair "was as brown as a nut an' as soft as silk," for presently when Mrs. Jones put out her hand and stroked that soft hair saying kindly, "Jest like silk, I feels orful good ter yer, Eunice," Eunice caught the old hand in her nervous ones. "Oh, Mrs. Jones," she plead, "Do like me ! I have been so friendless all my life !"

"Lawk sakes alive ! yer don't say so," was Mrs. Jones' only answer, but her glasses grew misty and she had to take them off and wipe them.

The two women were so absorbed in feeling that neither noticed a creaking board, nor knew that Jim Jones had been in the doorway, nor that, when Mrs. Jones lighting a candle, led the way up the back stairs to the small room she had had vacant, Jim walked up the front stairway, and stood in the hall watching them.

Supplying Eunice's needs, even to a brush and comb, Mrs. Jones sat down to see her "comb out thet nice hair."

Combing her hair was quite a process with Eunice. It was not that her hair was so long and thick, but that Mrs. Jones caught some of it in her hands, and kept on questioning and talking, until Eunice springing to her feet, with the veil of hair hanging about her, burst out with:

"Mrs. Jones, listen to my story. I am a widow! Yes, the widow of a man I hated, for not only did he win my love with the false profession of his, but he wasted my youth with his indifference, and dying, insulted me by never alluding to the woman, who for ten years had, in misery, yet in honor, borne his name. An orphan, and poor, wasn't that enough to make any one pity me?"

"I calkalates it war," responded Mrs. Jones heartily.

"Well he didn't pity me. Old enough to know the fickle coldness of his own nature, he tied to him by marriage a girl whose principles forbade divorce."

"He did!" Mrs. Jones' eyes snapped. "How the Bible do fit him. The lyin' an' deceitful man!"

"Yes, I married him, gave him youth, love, faith, hope, and labor too; for when he was low



down, I worked for him. And then afterward, when the tide changed, and money came, he tried to rid himself of me. Dared to say he was more comfortable without me, and *wanted* to be free. It was his sister's influence perhaps, but is not every one responsible for his own acts?"

"That they be, the villains!" was Mrs. Jones' emphatic acquiescence.

"And had he any soul, that man, Jim Belling, after ten years, from nineteen to twenty-nine, of my life, had he any soul to say to me, a woman with a heart, that a divorce was best, as he had made a mistake in marrying me? Mrs. Jones I would have suffered less if he had killed me! I would indeed!"

"Wal *I'm* glad he didn't, the tarnal mean thing. At any rate," Mrs. Jones said consolingly, "Yer hez the advantage o' him now, fer yer is free without no divorce, an' he is dead."

"Even in dying, he insulted me!" cried Eunice. "For years he has hardly paid my board, and now has left no money to pay the six months' bill at the hotel. I went away from the hotel as soon as he did. I knew nothing of his means until at the reading of his will, his property all given to his sister. O, such a mean woman, was enumer-

ated, and nothing for me. But I didn't care. I could live without his money. Would not have made an effort to get any of it, had not the clerk at the hotel, finding my address, sent me the unpaid bill, and I learned that there was no provision made, not only no provision for the widow's bills, but none for the expenses of the wife of Jim Belling. Then I vowed I'd have my rights. Then I told Helen Belling, his sister, that I'd come to Mulketayne, and break that will. Now what shall I do, dear Mrs. Jones, you are wiser and older than I. Tell me?"

She threw herself on her knees at Mrs. Jones' side, the old lady putting an arm around her shoulders as she said: "Pore gal, pore little gal," while Jim noiselessly went down the stairs.

## CHAPTER IX.

### "JIM'S OPINION."

"Now yer jest go ter sleep, and I'll hev it out with Jim. His opinion's worth somethin'," and Mrs. Jones tucked Eunice in bed.

This kind attention was a new experience for the friendless girl, who, while she stood self confessed of the mature age of twenty-nine, was far too pretty, looked far too young, for all the years and cares that had fallen to her share. "Jest a pore little gal, an' nuthin' else," said Mrs. Jones after she had recounted Eunice's story to Jim. He had been busied with his figures while his mother had talked, running his pencil up and down the margin of the newspaper, writing in every variety of combinations the two numerals, 19-29-29-19. A strange sum to be computed, requiring much attention. So much so, that while his mother waited for his answer she dozed, and would have fallen from her chair but that Jim caught her.

Caught her so tenderly, that she wasn't even startled, waking with a laugh, and a :

"Lawk sakes alive! I do declare! Wouldn't hev believed I'd been asleep, only thet you caught me, Jim."

Her son didn't speak, but looked as if he had something to say, a way he had when his mother asked advice, and he was ready to give it.

"If it wouldn't disturb yer calkerlations Jim, I think yer'd better giv me yer opinion ter night," suggested Mrs. Jones. She ain't got no money ter waste, yet I'd give a year's savin's ter see her righted an' thet hateful Helen Belling git justice."

Jim listened.

Even after his mother had ceased speaking he didn't open his lips, yet those sharp eyes were full of meaning.

Finally, when Mrs. Jones urged :

"Give yer opinion Jim, she'll take it an' be satisfied," he rose, stretched himself, so great a fellow that he was not unlikely a heavy weight champion. He looked too, as if he could fight for a thing he wanted, the sort of fellow that if he were in earnest, his opponent had better be on guard. Just now he seemed very much in earnest



as he looked down on his mother and then said :

“ Mother.”

Jim's voice was the nicest thing about him, being full, deep and very harmonious. With such a voice he should not have been so chary of his words. Yet he was. Even now, speaking to his mother, he used as few words as possible. “ Mother,” the deep voice rolled out like the tone of an organ, “ tell her to keep from the law. To seek quiet and happiness.”

“ Lawk sakes, what a comfort yer are Jim, always knows the right thing ! She'll keep from the law. I'll tell her what yer sez. Are yer goin' ter bed? No ! More figgers? Well then. God's blessin' on the best son in the world,” and Mrs. Jones reached over and put a hand on each of Jim's broad shoulders.

“ Good night,” said her son.

He kissed her cheek. Not much for a son to do. But Jim did it in such a tender way that it seemed a great deal. His mother thought so, blessing him as she went into her room above the sitting room, smiling and shaking her head as his voice reached her, chanting the numerals 19-29. “ Figgers agen,” she said, lulled to sleep by Jim's musical tones.

Eunice heard Jim, thought he was singing and wondered why he used only two tones. But what sweet full tones! And how she loved music!

Presently she wandered into dreamland wherein that music sang to her of hope.

And still Jim sat in his great chair intoning the figures, 19-29-29-19- looking straight ahead with those sharp eyes fixed on something.

Presently he roused himself, put out the light, walked into the kitchen, turned up the lamp, and took a survey of the room. Everything was in order, the teacups washed and back in their places on the shelf, the table dusted, all as neat as Eunice could make it, just as Mrs. Jones always left it. The only things telling of the addition to the Jones' family were a woman's hat and jacket hanging on the peg next to Jim's old coat.

"Hers," said Jim.

He took the little straw hat on his hand, turning it round and round, looking at its neatness, its poverty, as he said slowly those figures 19-29. Then he frowned. Frowned until he looked fierce with rage, as in a voice to match his face, he said "Damn him."

## CHAPTER X.

### “ HUGH STRATHLEY'S WARD.”

This word, “ward” came to Hugh as he saw Eunice disappear and Ayres in hot pursuit after her. This great lump of a woman weighing on his breast like a ton of lead, was his ward ! He had called her so not an hour ago. And that other woman, with a face, the like in interest he had never seen, was the virago !

Well he was sufficiently punished.

If he could not soon relieve himself of this too, “too solid flesh” there'd be nothing left of him even to suffer.

Being one of those men who in a difficulty seek the nearest way out, he hauled the robust frame of Miss Helen Belling to one of the benches outside of the depot, and depositing it thereon, was surprised to see her open her eyes and hear her, albeit in feeblest tones, call to her maid for “the vinagrette.”

As the maid held two satchels on one arm and Fido, the poodle, in the other, she looked around for a distracted second, and then hastened by a

more impatient "vinagrette" from Miss Belling, in her dire distress, turned to Hugh and with :

"Sir, if you please, I dare not put him down," thrust into that gentleman's arms confiding Fido.

Finding himself relieved of one burden only to be given another, Mr. Strathley rebelled, letting the dog, not too gently, test the force of gravitation. Around the platform Fido ran yelping, the blanket tied securely about his neck, trailing after *à la* court train, until called, "precious beauty," by his fair mistress, he was taken to her tender embrace.

It was illustrative of Miss Belling's remarkable recuperative powers, or the restorative efficacy of her elegant vinagrette, that the lady had become quite herself. Grasping the elaborate combination of cut glass and silver, so large an affair that Hugh thought it might be dangerous as a weapon, she sniffed its aroma, rose to her feet, and with a smile so open, that it disclosed all the porcelain fittings of her mouth, said : "I'm quite ready to accompany you," returned Fido to her frightened maid, with the whispered warning, "Be more careful of him," and walking she leaned on Hugh's arm, looking into his face. "Leering," Hugh



was rude enough in thought to name Miss Belling's expression, yet she was a woman accustomed to society's ways, therefore knew how to make use of its regulations in subduing a gentleman, for with every disposition to rebel, Mr. Strathley yielded as meekly to Miss Belling's will as did the pale creature occupying the position of maid to the lady, and nurse to the dog.

When Miss Belling was escorted to the carriage Mr. Strathley's faint effort at escape was immediately frustrated by Miss Belling's

"Of course you will accompany me to the hotel and see me comfortably fixed?"

"Of course, of course," acquiesced Hugh, mentally grinding his teeth.

"That's very nice of you," said Miss Belling, when she had him securely seated beside her; "for I am so, so sensitive, so impulsive, and you do so remind me of my dear brother that, really, I already feel as if, if you quite belong to me."

In his heart Hugh thanked the kind Providence that had spared him from such subjection, but his only audible observation was the commonplace society lie:

"You are very kind," simply because he did not know what else to say, saying it, however.

with such lack of interest that it is strange Miss Belling did not resent his indifference.

But she did not. On the contrary, she was ready to like whatever Hugh did or said.

Whether it was his languid manner which women found "taking," or that the arm upon which she had leaned was strong, or that the man's body, as it had touched hers, was full of vitality, whatever the cause, Miss Belling had made up her mind that Hugh Strathley was a desirable bachelor, and that she liked dark men. Ignorant of the favorable impression he had created, Hugh was relieved when the hotel was reached. Assisting Miss Belling from the carriage, he went to the office to send the clerk to her, when a hearty "Ha! ha!" and "Strathley, so you've become a family man," made him turn, to find that Fido, that wretched poodle, was tagging after his heels in the most attentive manner, striving to jump up on his legs, while with blanket trailing and tail wagging, he gave the elegant Mr. Strathley something of the appearance of a traveling showman.

"How fond he is of you," exclaimed Miss Belling, when at Mr. Strathley's direction a porter had conveyed the struggling little beast to his mistress. "See how he tries to reach you."

And Fido verified her words, as he strained his neck out of joint, licking out his little tongue in frantic desire to touch Mr. Strathley's coat.

"He has such remarkable intelligence," said Miss Belling consigning her pet to the maid, while she captured Strathley for herself, walking him, as she leaned on his arm, through the hall to the reception room, and not releasing him until he was captured for supper.

"You are stopping at the hotel?" she inquired, and when Strathley was forced to admit that he was, she added, "How charming! We'll sup together at seven? Ah?" leaving Hugh a prisoner on parole, swearing at the stupidity of social requirements which force a man to do what he does not want, making him envy the independence of the noble savage, who can at least scalp unwelcome visitors, and Hugh was savage enough to desire Miss Belling's scalp.

He managed to endure the supper and despite occasional relapses into wandering thoughts, as to what had become of the Widow, made himself so agreeable to Miss Belling that she resolved to have him spend the evening with her and perhaps! Ah! So after supper, entirely in opposition to his own resolves, Hugh found himself seated on

the corner of the sofa in Miss Belling's parlor, feeling very much like a blue bottle fly in the web of a huge spider.

This woman's will was awful! He watched her as she sat in a great chair so big and blonde, playing even Jim Belling, whom, somehow, as he found himself in subjection, he began to look upon, as the puppet of this sister of his.

Fat little Jim! Too lazy to do anything but take his own pleasure! Drowning every care in wine! What wonder he did exactly as this great big Helen, with her porcelain teeth, and projecting eyes, desired? Even that last will of Jim's became possible, as Hugh realized what Captain Cuttle must have endured; finding himself almost hypnotized by those expressionless orbs, of his "ward."

His "ward," Great Caesar! He'd be in the ward of an asylum if this thing went on much longer! Escape he would, and Hugh made a move toward the door, to find himself intercepted by Miss Belling.

"No! no!" she said coquettishly. "I can't let you go yet! You do so remind me of my dear brother," and she laid her hand on Hugh's arm.

Cold perspiration poured down the gentleman's spinal column. He felt himself sinking into a



night-mare as the dreadful fact impressed itself on his mind that Miss Belling was becoming affectionate.

“Ah!” she sighed. “Poor dear Jim! How often we have spoken of you! He was so happy in my care, never had to exert his own will.” Hugh groaned mentally. “When I entered into his life and rescued him from that dreadful character he married, he hardly knew how to appreciate his happiness. But he learned afterward! He proved it too, did he not, Mr. Strathley, by that will? It isn’t often a brother leaves everything to a sister, is it, Mr. Strathley? It takes a mighty reason to induce such a course.”

Miss Belling shook her head slowly, apparently meditating, but her cold light eyes were taking note of Hugh’s expression. Luckily, or unluckily, she could not note his thoughts, which were a running commentary on the lady’s remarks, wherein the weight of the reasons which induced Jim Belling to act like a villain, *i. e.*, the heaviness of this sister with her will added thereto, was absolutely paralyzing him.

He felt numbness creeping over him, the curious fascination of those eyes overpowering him, as they had doubtless overpowered Jim, and

making a desperate effort, utterly disregarding the law enjoining obedience to a lady's will, Strathley grasped the door knob as a drowning man a plank, and mumbling some apology which he himself could not understand, made a hasty exit, running down the stairs into the night, and breathed the blessed air of freedom.

Phew! What an awful woman! If he had only seen the last of her! But all those to-morrows when he must be thrown with his ward loomed up like prison walls, shutting out light. His ward! Great gods! She was his Nemesis! Punishing him for every sin of his life! His Medusa! Turning him into stone!

And that smile! With its sets of porcelain! He had rather liked false teeth, considering them an improvement on the old fashion of gumming it. But now! Well, if he were President, Pope of Rome, or any other potentate, he would have laws enacted which awarded to the wearers of false teeth the death penalty. If ever he loved a woman who wore false teeth she should discard them at once, and gum it for the rest of her life. If she hesitated, she could never be the wife of Hugh Strathley. That at least was as unalterable as the laws of the Medes and Persians.

But as Strathley so savagely and unjustly inveighed against artistic masticators, the idea of the woman who was to be honored by bearing his name drove dentists and porcelain out of his mind, every particle, or rather its whole capacity being filled by the face he had looked on for the first time this day.

A brown face with such red, red lips, and two lovely brown eyes. A face, fresh, fair, smiling! Red, frowning angry! Trembling, indignant, tearful! But always beautiful, always the face of Eunice Belling.

## CHAPTER XI.

### "THE NEW TYPEWRITER."

From dreams of her, Hugh awakened to see the little basket she had given him to hold, protruding from the back pocket of his coat! Had he walked about with that basket sticking out like one of those enlargements women disported? He laughed aloud. Laughing again and again as he took it in his hand, and the strong odor of its remaining sandwich explained Master Fido's devoted attachment for him.

"Self interest!" he exclaimed, "The same in man and beast." Then he blushed with shame. *She* had not thought of self interest, poor little girl, when without a dollar she had thrown the borrowed money in his face. He took out the little ball she had made of the greenback and then put it back in his vest pocket. Starvation alone would induce him to unroll that bit of paper, twirled up by those nervous fingers.

She thought he was Helen Belling's friend! Bah! How he detested that woman! He owed it to himself to disabuse Mrs. Belling's mind of the



idea that under any circumstances he could array himself against her! A widow had the first claim on a man's sympathy, decided Mr. Strathley, oblivious of his own very openly expressed repugnance to this particular widow, and how he had implored Mr. Ayres to relieve him of her. The truth is, Hugh felt very sore about the rapidity with which Mr. Ayres had relieved him of the Widow, and was most impatient to learn how he had disposed of his charge. So impatient, that he had awakened hours before his usual time, astonishing the hotel breakfast room by appearing at the meal prepared for the passengers by early train. Hurrying with his coffee, and congratulating himself that he had escaped Miss Belling for this morning at least, he started off for a walk, wandering about the streets of Mulketawne, while the lazy sun was making the sky blush with his kisses.

"The early bird catches the worm," thought Hugh wondering what worm would be out waiting for him, as a door opened from a little house where he had passed many hours of his childhood. It is possible old associations led him through this particular part of the city. But whatever led him, he called it a particular streak of luck, as

though that opened door passed first, Jim Jones, his old crony and present assistant bookkeeper, and with him, was it possible? Yes, it was! Mrs. Jim Belling herself, fresh and fair as the morning!

In his pleasurable surprise, Hugh called her name. At the sound she turned her head, the smile with which she had said "Good bye" to Mrs. Jones fading from her face as giving him a cold bow, she passed on.

He might not have felt so chilled by that bow, could he have seen the brilliant blush that followed it, or have known the choking sense in Eunice's throat, when she thought of him as the friend of Helen Belling. He who had stepped out of the misty-nowhere, so kind, even about those apples, to be suddenly transformed into the friend of the woman who had entered her early married life, ruined her home, robbed her of even such a poor thing as Jim Belling's affection! It was hard, awfully hard!

Then Eunice resolutely turned her face to the other side. She thought of Mr. Ayres' kindness, the good friends among whom she had fallen, and out of her grateful heart, looked up with a smile and met Jim Jones' sharp eyes.

"Cold?" he asked.

"No." She nodded her head that he might understand her, her face glowing in the frosty air, her eyes bright with the thankfulness of her heart.

Jim nodded back and looked away, turning every once in a while for another glance. Entirely too often thought Hugh, who, having nothing particular to do, no especial place to seek, unconsciously followed those two briskly moving figures, which, after awhile, he saw were making for the office of the "Consolidated Milling Company."

There was no reason why Hugh should not enter the office, so into it he went, and found Jim Jones introducing Mrs. Jim Belling to the head clerk. Jim's words were few. "Mrs. Belling, engaged by Mr. Ayres." The clerk having heard nothing from Mr. Ayres, and yet most willing to, in any way, accommodate so pretty a lady, was in a quandary, from which Mr. Strathley's arrival released him.

"A lady, sir. Old Jim says engaged by Mr. Ayres,"—he started to explain, when Hugh cut him short. "Ah, Mrs. Belling," he said, cordially shaking her hand. "Mr. Ayres has engaged your services."—"As type-writer and

stenographer," Eunice quickly added, for she felt herself growing so red at the warm pressure of Mr. Strathley's hand, that she knew she must say something or—or—with that curious choking in the throat, and a certain nervousness all over, she could not tell what might happen.

By recalling herself to business and getting at work, she would be able to overcome these peculiar sensations which seemed to her, deplorable weakness, meanness too, for now that she had regular work and a good home, she was mean to feel vexed even if Helen Belling had him for a friend.

"Type-writer," repeated Hugh. "just what we needed."

"Certainly, certainly. Mr. Ayres was very fortunate in securing your services." Then to the clerk who thought the "boss" was making a great deal over the new hand: "Have the caligraph moved into the private office." and Mr. Strathley opened the door into a very nicely furnished room, where there stood one desk.

"We will have to be fellow-workers, Mrs. Belling," he said, no trace of languor now in voice or manner, yet Hugh Strathley had never been more attractive than at this moment. So very attractive and winning, that presently Eunice forgot about



his being a friend to Helen Belling, or rather it did not so distress her, being quite occupied in thinking how very kind he was to her, putting in her corner the most comfortable chair, attending himself that she had one suited to her for working purposes, and then having told the clerk that in his absence, he, the clerk, was to consider Mrs. Belling's comfort his especial charge, as she stood in the light of an old friend, dismissed him.

When the two were alone, Mr. Strathley turned to Eunice with the words :

"I trust you will pardon my claiming friendship with you, but really, I never felt more the friend of anyone than I do yours, Mrs. Belling." He gave her no chance to reply before he asked the question :

"Did Mr. Ayres mention your salary?" and when she had said, "No, but he told me I was to take the place of the former stenographer" Hugh only said "Yes," with a slight elevation of the brows, and such a frank smile, that Eunice smiled too, and immediately felt at her ease. She felt more than that presently, being very grateful when Hugh, having rapidly written out a check for \$75, handed it to Eunice to be endorsed. "Just put your name on the back, and then here on the

book," he said, again giving her no chance for a word, "and I'll have the boy bring up the cash with the first mail."

"Oh," Eunice began, but stopped at once when Hugh said, "It is no favor, Mrs. Belling, only an accommodation that, were we to change places, I am sure you would do for me."

How nicely he put it, taking away the discomfort, and leaving only a warm glow of gratitude for his thoughtfulness.

When she was apparently happy, busily making out a file of letters Strathley had placed on her desk, he left her with the request that she'd "please try to feel at home at once," and his face beaming, went down town, walking into Mr. Ayres' office, and startling that gentleman with a slap on the back, and a "Hello, Ayres," called out in the most jovial manner. "How's the Widow, eh?"

Somebody wrote that nothing is so selfish as a happy man. Whether this be true or not, a happy man is not very observant, or Hugh, brimming over with contentment, might have seen from Mr. Ayres' countenance, that he was in no humor for joviality or questions about anything. Mr. Ayres was, in fact, decidedly out of sorts, for

though driven to his arms by that terrible mouse, Mrs. Ayres had slumbered placidly, her awakening had been anything but placid. She had made him dance, too, or had at least tried to make him dance to the tune of a mood so vexing and persistent, that had his opinion been asked, and he had candidly given it, he would have sung the old rhyme :

*Needles and pins, needles and pins  
When a man marries his trouble begins.*

But then, of course, Mr. Ayres would never, under any circumstances, have spoken his candid opinion of matrimony, and indeed it would have been hard for him to have held to any opinion on this trying subject for more than a few moments at a time. For while his Helen had since yesterday proven herself considerable of a nuisance, yet she had so crept into his life and heart that even in his present vexation, he would not have resigned her society. But he would have had her a little more sensible. Fancy a man treated to hysterics in the evening, then told he must discharge a clerk he had just engaged, and for no other reason than because his wife wished it. Fancy his forgiving all this, going to sleep feeling his troubles were well over, and being awakened at 5 A. M. by the

voice of his better half saying, "Well, ducky, I suppose it's settled, and the widow will be discharged at once."

Then fancy his trying, first coaxing, then reasoning, then even descending to appealing to her own heart that it might feel for another and less fortunate woman, only to be met with the unalterable, "I insist that you dismiss that Widow."

Of course, he would not! Nor could he go back on his word. But for all that, the widow became a sore subject. Of no more interest to him than any other helpless woman, yet she had, temporarily of course, destroyed the peace of Herbert Ayres' life, and he felt touchy about it, so touchy that when Strathley shouted, "How's the widow?" Ayres responded with "O damn it! I'm sick of the Widow."

"Well Ayres, I'm ashamed of you to swear at a lady," said Hugh seriously.

If anything is exasperating, it is to have a man say he's ashamed of you, for what you are yourself ashamed of, yet how natural to defend yourself, and bring a counter-charge as Ayres, with his, "You'd better be ashamed of yourself for the way you spoke of that lady."

"I am," said Hugh, "heartily ashamed of



every word I have said of her. She is a thorough lady, and no mistake."

"O let up on the Widow," said Ayres sulkily.

"No, sir," replied Hugh, serious and earnest. "I find her a lady a man should be proud to know. I feel indebted to you, Ayres, for telling her to go to the office, for I have taken her into my private office, and I intend her to be my secretary, so you are relieved of any trouble on that score."

"The impertinent puppy," thought Ayres. Though there could be nothing less like a puppy than Hugh Strathley, especially now when his pleasure made him so handsome. Yet he had said, himself, "It was just as one looked at it," so he should not have complained if he had known the thought behind Herbert Ayres' cold stare.

He did not know it, however, going on contentedly with, "Yes, my private secretary. I have long wanted one, and feel myself very fortunate in obtaining the services of Mrs. Belling."

"Indeed?" said Mr. Ayres.

"Yes," asserted Hugh.

Mr. Ayres was silent a moment, then looked at his watch remembering a threat Mrs. Ayres had made, and wondering if she had carried it into effect. If she had—yet he would not believe it of

her. But if not, how had Hugh Strathley dared to take out of the company's employ without consulting him, a clerk he had engaged. Now Mrs. Ayres' threat had been, "If you don't choose to do as I say, Mr. Ayres, and dismiss that widow, I know some one who will oblige me, and I'll have him do it, sir."

Uttered by the fair Helen, and forgotten the moment after, she had said to herself, "I'll scare him into it," these words now recurred to her husband. Viewed in this light, Strathley's conduct became offensive. Whereas Strathley, himself had conceived the brilliant idea of engaging Mrs. Belling as his private secretary, only while he had walked down from the office to see his friend, Mr. Ayres.

As his own secretary, Eunice's position would not be a subject of general discussion among the directors, who objected, for the most part, to any but low salaries, and some of them, old fogies, were constantly twitting Hugh with his extravagance. He would not submit to their bending their noses over the salary paid to Mrs. Belling, nor staring at her cheeks through their double-barreled eyes.

He would not, in fact, submit to any interference with Mrs. Belling. Possibly the thought

of his own secretary had arisen from the fact that he had paid her her salary in advance, with his own check. Possibly, because Hugh found the Widow more interesting in the morning than he had done in the evening, and—well, a man will understand it—the interest growing warmer, he had—well he had about determined that if she worked, or as long as she worked, she should work for no one but himself. The very idea of any one else ordering Eunice Belling about became unbearable. As his own secretary, she would soon find herself her own mistress, and—. And then Hugh had fallen deep into meditations on matrimony, arriving at Ayres' office in the best possible humor, prepared to stand considerable teasing, but not prepared for the cold stare from his friend, and his colder words :

“I would like to know, Mr. Strathley, by what right you interfere in my private matters?”

His private affairs! Hugh flushed hot! Ayres had made a stride when he called the Widow his private affairs! How dared he call her his private affairs?

“May I ask, sir,” Hugh's face paled with rage, “when you acquired any such rights over Mrs. Belling?”

"You may not ask sir!" said Ayres coldly.  
"You may not ask any impertinent questions."

For now Ayres was quite decided that Mrs. Ayres must have seen Hugh, who was generally lounging about the hotel until eleven, the fashionable hour for calling. Mrs. Ayres had frequently met him there when she had gone to see her friends, had announced her determination to go to the hotel this morning to question "Miss Helen Belling about that horrid Widow." Aha! Ayres saw it all now.

He knew Mrs. Ayres was liable to speak her thoughts to any one.

In her angry mood she had met Hugh, had told him she wanted the Widow dismissed, and Hugh had dared to sympathize with her to oppose himself to her husband, and had taken the Widow into his own employ!

Mr. Hugh Strathley was carrying things with a high hand!

If Herbert Ayres had been quite himself, he probably would have "pooh-poohed" this idea, and killed it in its inception. But he was not. He had made an unsatisfactory dinner, had literally eaten no breakfast, was generally out of sorts even to having an upset stomach, and O,



beware of a man with an upset stomach! It breeds suspicions and all sorts of things, transforming even a good kind man like Herbert Ayres, into a quarrelsome fellow.

He looked so threateningly at Hugh, who returned his stare with interest, that any one uninterested would have seen they were bound for a fight. "I call your action in this matter d——d impertinent," said Ayres slowly.

"Have a care, Ayres," Hugh's face was white now, his eyes black as coals. "Have a care! Our words touch a woman, who, if she can claim no other protection, shall have mine, sir."

"Yours!" Ayres spoke between his teeth, trembling with rage. So altogether blinded by rage that the only woman in his thoughts, blotting out the Widow and all else, was his own wife, Helen Ayres.

"Yours. Do you dare presume sir? That lady has my protection. I am quite capable, sir, of looking to her," hissed Herbert Ayres.

"Capable of looking to her!" repeated Hugh no longer making an effort at self control as Ayres unblushingly attacked the Widow's reputation. "It is only my respect for your wife, sir, that prevents my killing you on the instant."

“Blackguard!” shouted Ayres.

He let fly his fist, Strathley caught it, and the two grappled.

Straining in their close hug of hate, these two who had so lately been friends, fell with a crash, Hugh uppermost as the door was flung open, and in rushed two ladies.

## CHAPTER XII.

### “A SLIGHT MISUNDERSTANDING.”

“O you villain! You villain!” screamed the smaller of the ladies, pounding Hugh’s back with the prettiest and daintiest of gloved fists. As he glanced around, recognizing her Strathley exclaimed, “I beg your pardon Mrs. Ayres,” and springing to his feet, bowing very low to this new enemy attired in the most elegant of costumes, he said “I beg your pardon, madam. Your husband and I were having—having—”

He looked at Ayres, half inclined to laugh, for his ill temper evaporating with his violent exercise, he remembered how kind Mr. Ayres had been about this affair of the Widow, and had a sneaking notion that he had misunderstood Ayres, and had been making a fool of himself.

Had Ayres’ anger been as transitory, it is probable the two would have shaken hands at once, and the subject have been dropped between them.

But slow to anger, Ayres was not so readily appeased. He had believed his wife to be the lady

in the case, and, no slight circumstance, in the tussle with Hugh he had been the worsted one.

Only slightly worsted, and the struggle just begun, he might have ended conqueror, but he had had no chance. This fact added its own annoyance to those already accumulated, and besides his wife by rushing into the mêlée, had made him absurd, than which, no position is more difficult to endure with dignity. So Mr. Ayres took no notice of Hugh's silent appeal, leaving him to struggle with his "having," until Mrs. Ayres picked it up.

"Well! I should say you were having, a having!" she said.

Adding with all the fierceness she could express "If you *dare* to have any more of that 'having,' with my husband I'll ——"

"Mrs. Ayres," interrupted Mr. Ayres, "you had better not make yourself ridiculous."

Spoken in his stiffest manner, and more coldly than he had ever found it possible to address his fair Helen, these words of Herbert Ayres overpowered his liege lady.

"Oh! Herbie! How could you speak to me like that?" cried the irrational, but lovely creature, bursting into tears, and looking so innocent



and injured, that, seeing no one else noticed her, Hugh Strathley blundered into a mistake.

"Pray do not distress yourself, Mrs. Ayres," he said, feeling himself the brutal cause of the lady's woe, and overpowered by it, especially, when, raising her face from the delicate web of linen she had held to it, Mrs. Ayres presented to the gentleman's view the most bewitching Niobe. "I am alone to blame, madam;" Hugh repeated, "but pray do not distress yourself further."

"I am not distressing myself," replied the lady sobbing. "It's you and Herbie who distressed—essed me."

"It shall never occur again," protested Hugh, warming to his subject, which in the fair Helen's presence, no man could fail to do. "Mr. Ayres and I were only having a little tussle: Eh, Ayres?" he said lightly.

No response from Ayres.

Mentally calling him a "brute," and being still more excited by the sobs of Mrs. Ayres, Strathley determined, at any sacrifice, to appease her. "I assure you, madam, there is nothing serious between us," he continued. "To prove it to you I hold out my hand to your husband. There, Ayres! If I said a word that was not correct, I beg your pardon."

Strathley never looked so handsome, Ayres never appeared so sulky, as he unwillingly touched Hugh's hand.

Mrs. Ayres relieved, rewarded Hugh with a smile, turning to her husband a pouting face, that at another time, would have made him laugh, for the face was so pretty with its little grimace, and Helen Ayres so charming in all she did.

Now, however, with the "green-eyed monster" eating its way into his mind, Ayres' vision was distorted. Even Mrs. Ayres, sweet and variable as a spring day; her moods, like a child's, without intention or malice, seen by Ayres' present lights; was a new and strange being.

Her present graciousness to Strathley took upon it a meaning, of which it was perfectly innocent. Not that Ayres thought ill of his wife.

Honest himself, he did not incline to think evil of others. But when Hugh, after shaking his hand, said to Mrs. Ayres, "I hope you will forgive the annoyance I have unwillingly caused you," and the little lady put her hand into his, the two together looked so well mated, that somehow his own years smote on Herbert Ayres' heart.

Was he jealous? Not a bit. For if he had been he surely would have known it. All men

know themselves, or believe they do. And Herbert Ayres was no exception to this belief in self-knowledge, as he stood pulling down his cuffs, dusting a speck of lint from his coat, not seeming to see, yet most acutely sensible of the fine dark young fellow, who formed so attractive a foil for the charms of Helen Ayres.

On the shady side of forty, growing heavy and becoming slow! For the period of a minute this criticism of himself forced itself on Mr. Ayres' consideration, while the lady who had entered the office with Mrs. Ayres, whom the gentlemen had not seen and Mrs. Ayres had forgotten, gave an "ahem" to remind every one of her existence.

"O!" exclaimed Mrs. Ayres, "I'm a regular goosey! I forgot all about you. Please excuse me, but I was so unhappy when Herbie became so angry with me," a languishing look at "Herbie," "that I forgot all about everything."

Miss Belling's presence still further annoyed Mr. Ayres, for it seemed to him that all Mulketawne was become witness to his private vexations. He bowed most politely to the lady, mentally wishing her in Tophet, and then, making a casual remark, was unwillingly forced to enter into conversation.

For Miss Belling, noting Mr. Strathley's interest in Mrs. Ayres, and his keeping at as great distance from herself as the office allowed, resolved, if she could, to let a word or two slip, which might, like seed sown in good soil, bear fruit. It depends always on the soil. But if that be favorable, a well sown word will sometimes bring forth a bountiful harvest. And malice is a good sower when guided by shrewdness, neither of which attributes was a foreigner to Miss Belling's capacious breast.

"I am delighted to renew my acquaintance with you, Mr. Ayres," said Miss Belling, after returning Mr. Strathley's "Good morning." "In fact, Mrs. Ayres, during the charming visit with which she has just favored me, has been in such ecstasies over the happiness of 'two hearts and souls,' that I wanted by daylight to see the inspiring cause of her eulogy, which of course is yourself."

"Indeed," said Mr. Ayres, coldly.

"Yes, indeed!" gushingly echoed Miss Belling. "We lone ones like to know of the existence of such delights, don't we, Mr. Strathley?" She tried to attract the gentleman.

"I beg pardon," said Hugh, who had been very busy answering the question of Mrs. Ayres.



“O, no matter!” Miss Belling’s smile became painfully open. “No matter. It is good enough to keep. We’ll have our secrets, too, won’t we, Mr. Ayres? We’ll see if for a moment we can’t play that we two are very interesting to each other. All life’s a play, isn’t it?”

“It is so proclaimed,” said Mr. Ayres, hiding with cold indifference that Miss Belling’s little thrust had touched him.

He would have indignantly denied it, but for all that her apparently unintended joke had sunk into the soil. “She sees it, too,” had been his instantaneous thought, repelled as quickly as it came, yet it had come, and thoughts are powerful agencies.

And Miss Belling knew her words had not been lost, notwithstanding Mr. Ayres’ indifference of manner; so, loading her gun, she prepared for another shot. After a moment’s silent survey of Mrs. Ayres, Miss Belling said:

“Your wife is wonderfully beautiful, Mr. Ayres.”

The gentleman bowed his acknowledgment, but himself not given to compliment, was not affected pleasantly by this gushing effusion. “Wonderfully beautiful,” continued Miss Belling, her prom-

inent eyes apparently dwelling on the charms of Helen Ayres. "So fair, so very fair. I suppose that is why artists always paint dark Fausts to love the blonde Marguerites. A woman's beauty is so enhanced by the opposite style in a man, don't you think so?"

Mr. Ayres really did not know anything about those matters, in fact, was no judge of beauty.

His answer, given in the fewest possible words, with no thawing of his cold manner, did not discourage Miss Belling, for she had seen a quick flush rise under Herbert Ayres' fair skin, and continued: "You should study effects," she said. Mr. Ayres had no time.

"Why, now! You have the opportunity. Don't you see what a picture Mrs. Ayres is?"

At this moment Mrs. Ayres did present a picture. A most lovely picture, but totally unlike tender Marguerite. For her blue eyes wide open, were sparkling with delight at something Mr. Strathley had said, and all about her pretty lips, little dimples peeped, each one full of fun.

"O! O! O! It's true," said the little lady laughing and shaking her finger at him: "I know it is." These words reached Mr. Ayres. He noted also a dark flush which rushed over Hugh's

face, and then conscious of watching his wife, and disdaining to stoop to such a course, he moved so he could not see her, giving his attention to the art of conversation, and Miss Belling.

If he had been less the gentleman, and had watched Mrs. Ayres, his mind would have been considerably relieved, for she was very busy invading the confidence of Mr. Strathley, and learning all she could about another woman than herself.

“You say she has brown eyes?” asked Mrs. Ayres.

“Very brown!” replied Hugh.

“And a perfect lady?”

“A perfect lady,” replied Hugh.

“If your mother were living would you introduce her to the Widow?”

“If my mother were living, she would call this morning on Mrs. Belling.”

Hugh spoke this so earnestly, that instantly Mrs. Ayres said: “You’re in love,” and then louder, more delighted by her discovery than Columbus when he first saw America, O! O! O! it’s true, I know! I’m going to tell Herbie all about this; I won’t object any more to the Widow.”

“For,” with a smile and nod, “I must tell you

the truth, I had an awful tiff with him about this very same Widow. I was just terribly jealous!" Poor dear Herbie stood it like a man! Didn't scold a bit. But now I'm all right! For you love the Widow! I know it! Don't deny it!" Hugh didn't deny it unless a dark blush be so construed. "I'll live yet to dance to your wedding," cried the fair prophetess, doing more than most prophets, in that she firmly believed her own prophecy.

"I'm so relieved," continued Mrs. Ayres, "to know the Widow's nice. That old Helen Belling said all sorts of mean things about her. I just want to tell her to her face that she's a hateful old—" with a sweet little laugh, "untruth teller."

Hugh was perfectly willing, was only deterred by the fact of sex and society's laws from himself telling what he thought of Miss Belling.

But, as often happened with Mrs. Ayres when she opened her pretty mouth her strongest feeling took precedence, therefore, as the very strongest feeling that had ever possessed her was affection for Herbert Ayres; the first words she uttered were: "Herbie, I take back all I said this morning. I'm perfectly satisfied now," which



speech had for its effect the convincing Ayres beyond further doubt that Strathley had, in engaging the Widow's services for his private convenience, obeyed a wish of Mrs. Herbert Ayres.

As polite society expressly forbids the speaking of suspicions, and thus the speedy clearing away of doubts, Mr. Ayres, educated under its laws, kept his beliefs to himself, simply bowing to Mrs. Ayres and saying, he congratulated her on having been satisfied, simulating contentment so well that Mrs. Ayres, who had never found anyone less than contented with her, saw nothing amiss in her husband's words. Miss Belling however, having sown all the seed she deemed advisable, became anxious about a matter of interest to her.

"My dear Mrs. Ayres, have you forgotten?" she asked, when the fair Helen signified her willingness to depart.

"Forgotten? No! I've changed my mind," was Mrs. Ayres reply. "Really, now I've no longer any objection to the Widow."

"Indeed! exclaimed Miss Belling" I thought you had quite determined on having that person discharged.

"So I had, when you said she was improper. I wouldn't allow an improper person to be employed by my husband."

At which positive usurping of man's privilege of rule, Mr. Ayres rose to the surface.

"I believe," he said trying to smile at his wife, and to speak lightly, but giving the general impression of seriousness and gloom. "I believe you will allow me to be the best judge of my employes, Mrs. Ayres."

"No, Herby dear," was Mrs. Ayres' unhesitating reply. "I don't think I would, not where a woman's concerned. Men are such poor judges of women."

"May I ask who made this charge against Mrs. Jim Belling?" And Hugh entered into the discussion, his face showing considerable interest. "For I presume the lady referred to is Mrs. Belling."

"Yes," answered Mrs. Ayres, and Miss Belling said so. "That is why we came here, for I declared if Mrs. Belling were improper, she shouldn't stay a moment in my husband's employ."

Mr. Ayres could not stand any more such "nonsense."

"Be kind enough" he interposed, "to leave the right management of my business to me."

"Certainly the right, but not the wrong" replied Mrs. Ayres. Here Mr. Ayres bit his lip to

hold back his words, that this stupid controversy might not be continued.

But "the Widow" seemed to be such a moving subject that once introduced, there was no possibility of dropping her.

Hugh taking advantage of the lull between the married pair, hot with anger at Miss Belling's charge against Eunice, said to her: "You have made a grave assertion, Miss Belling. One that you may be called upon to prove. For though that lady may have no natural protection, she has friends who will not hear her wronged."

Not being married, Hugh did not understand the folly of prolonged debate, nor that the last words are always worst.

"Friends," sneered Miss Belling, her temper rising, "of how long standing? Who in the lady's defense will these friends attack? Me? Perhaps it might be as well to let the assertion you object to, remain as an assertion. Once proven, it will become a fact, and facts, ha! ha!" a sneering laugh that set Hugh's teeth on edge, "are very stubborn. As for proof, if I wanted to prove anything, I'd call you two gentlemen as my witnesses. First you, Mr. Strathley, would be asked if it is your habit, on such short acquaint-

ance, to become so friendly with every woman? And you, Mr. Ayres, if you make it your practice to run a race with ladies after dark? If this be so, poor Mrs. Ayres, it is well you should hang to your romance of 'two souls with but a single thought.' Romances are very beguiling. "Good morning," and Miss Belling sailed out of the room leaving behind her three very angry auditors.

"Hateful thing" cried Helen Ayres. "Herbie, she insinuated—Mr. Strathley if I didn't believe you, I'd—Oh," half crying, "I'm quite unsettled about that Widow. I'll go home to Mary. You needn't come with me, Mr. Ayers. You're just as indifferent as—as—a stone." With which words, divided between her belief in Hugh Strathley's love affair, and a re-awakening of her jealousy, Mrs. Ayres ran out of the office, down the stairs, and jumping into the sleigh, was driven away in less time than words can describe her motions."



## CHAPTER XIII.

### “IMPULSE.”

In such a trying moment of his existence it behooved Mr. Ayres to think. He was not the man to live with a flirting wife who permitted dark Fausts to cast ardent glances at her. If this was Mrs. Ayres' fancy, Mulketawne would not hold him.

Mulketawne was not all the world.

Yet with a twinge, Mr. Ayres, at this moment felt that small as it was, this city would form a good part of the universe for him, if this little affair were once to be “aired” in it.

There'd not be a gossip in town, but who would turn it over as tid-bit, and that that malicious old creature would keep the idea of Marguerite to herself, he dared not hope. As for the man, he could be easily settled.

Yet settling him would only spread the gossip, and add believers to the creed, that Strathley had dared to admire Mr. Ayres' wife.

The newspapers would take it up. Every penny-a-liner would give him a dig in the ribs!

D—! A man can't protect himself without being hauled up like a criminal, and the criminals have the best of it, for they have done something to deserve condemnation. Even the office boy knew there'd been a disturbance in the office. Herbert Ayres had observed a comical grin on the face of that astute young person, when he had tried to delay his wife, who rushing to Mary would be encouraged in believing herself deeply wronged.

Frowning at his thoughts, Mr. Ayres raised his eyes to find Hugh attentively regarding him.

Hugh had been indulging in his own thoughts, and they must have been happy ones if his face were an index. It was as bright as a boy's, as he turned to his older and wiser friend.

"Ayres," he said blushing as a boy might, "I must confess it to you, mad, as I suppose it will sound to a sensible fellow, and in such a fellow as I thought I was, but I feel for that woman, what, I can not understand. It may be her youth, her beauty, her impulsive nature, I'm sure I don't know what inspires the feeling, only under present circumstances, so there may not arise farther complications, it seems to me honorable to avow it to you."

Ayres gazed at him!

A male Medusa, but he had not the slightest effect on this stupid man.

“Yes, it is more honorable to avow it at once.” Hugh went on, “and to ask your advice. What shall I do? To offer her my protection at this hour of her acquaintance might insult her, yet I can not endure that any attacks should be made upon her, nor,” with absolute ingeniousness, “old fellow, can I even stand your tone toward her. I felt quite offended with you, yet I know you intended no rudeness for you’re an awfully good fellow. If I didn’t know this, I’d not be such a fool as to make a confession to you, but really, Ayres, I can not allow you to repeat any of those words you just now used. I must say this, while I apologize for showing my anger. Now give me your advice, how shall I, in the most respectful way, let her know what I feel?”

Ayres’ stare grew colder and more deadly.

If Strathley had had the slightest wandering in speech, he would have believed him suddenly gone mad. But the man’s very earnest eyes were full of intelligent purpose. Ayres could hardly command himself to speak.

“Are you a fool or a scoundrel?” he asked in a voice cold as his face. Then hotly. “All the

advice I have for you, is to take a pistol and fire it through your head. If you value your worthless life, you'd better have very little to say to that lady, for if I ever learn you've said a word to her beyond commonplace, I'll shoot you down like a dog."

Was it possible? Hugh asked this in a dazed way of himself, as he faced Herbert Ayres.

Here was this man with a wife, position, wealth, and yet reaching out to ruin a poor, a friendless woman; was maddened to find her with one ready to befriend her. Were men brutes that because a woman be fair they must forget the existence of honor?

He would have staked his life on the honor of Herbert Ayres! Yet here he was, filled with deadly purpose because the woman he basely admired, was honorably loved. For it had advanced to this with Hugh, actual love arose from the circumstances surrounding the Widow.

Eunice's loveliness, her poverty, weakening her protection against the wiles and evil purposes of such a man as Herbert Ayres. A man who could win every man's love. Had he not loved Ayres? Yes, and trusted him! What a fool he had been! If he had only gone to the depot alone, Ayres



might never have seen the widow, and he would never have found his friend to be a villain. Talk about wanting to destroy the illusions of life, they are all that make it endurable.

Feeling these thoughts rather than thinking them, there arose, possibly from his memory of Ayres' universal kindness, an idea that he might move him, out of pity, to spare Eunice any annoyance.

"Ayres," Hugh said, breaking the silence, "your threats are unworthy of you. Your purpose is unworthy of you. You cannot want to injure her. I would die before a breath should touch her name. You certainly have sufficient regard for yourself to do nothing to start slander against any woman."

"Every time you allude to her, you tarnish her name," said Ayres still as cold as a stone.

"Don't you utter such words," Hugh began to tremble with passion. "Don't you insinuate such a thought," he cried. "I love her! I would marry her this moment, would ask her to be my wife if I dared."

"Marry her!" gasped Ayres. "Has it advanced to that! This upsets reason."

He threw himself upon Hugh's breast with the

thirst for vengeance that his life alone could satisfy; then the world's clamor, his wife's name placarded with scandal, brought him back to his senses.

"Out of my sight," he hissed. "I'd kill you but for her," with which wild words, grasping his hat, Ayres pulled it down over his eyes, hurrying to the air, knowing that he must get away from that man, or take his life.

Aghast, Hugh watched his hasty exit. He had heard of men's passions, had believed he knew something of them, but nothing like this had ever entered into his imagination.

Had he gone to her in this mood?

Then Hugh grasped his hat, and at a double-quick dashed through the office, up the road, making for the Consolidated Milling Company's office and the Widow.

## CHAPTER XIV.

### "REASON."

It came to Helen Ayres weeping in the arms of her devoted Mary, receiving its inspiration from that "slavey's" ready acquiescence in every idea of her fair despot.

"I was so comfortable about that widow," whimpered pretty Helen.

"Yes, lamby."

"But now I don't know what to feel."

"No, lamby."

"Mary, I think I'll get a divorce."

"If you want one, deary."

"O no! What would I do with a divorce? I couldn't see Herbie if I had one."

"No, lamby."

"What shall I do, Mary?"

"Anything you want, deary."

"I don't know what I want, unless it be to be perfectly, perfectly, perfectly sure, that Herbie never thinks of any other woman, and adores me."

"And so you shall be, darling."

"How?" asked Helen, interest drying her tears.

"By just showing your pretty face to him; there's not another like it in the world."

"Isn't there, Mary?"

"Not one."

"Then I'll show it. And O, Mary, make me just as nice as possible; I'll let Herbie see no one is half so pretty as his own wifey. And I'll not cry and spoil my eyes."

Thus Reason came to Mrs. Ayres, leaving her busy with her toilette, and satisfied with her work. Reason took a flying leap from her blonde head right upon the little bald spot on the top of Mr. Ayres' cranium.

From the madness of Hugh Strathley's avowed love for his wife, Reason turned Mr. Ayres' thought to his Helen's conduct and character.

Forbidden love had not yet come to her! Of this he was sure.

Frank and guileless as a child, Mrs. Ayres' life even to jealous eyes, could disclose nothing deeper than a possible fancy for anything that amused her, and here a warm glow diffused itself through every fiber of Herbert Ayres' kind heart, for, after the examination of cool judgment, his Helen was



triumphant. Whatever any one felt for her, she had not, so far, been less than true to him.

To keep her thus, must now be her husband's care. He had won her heart; perpetual vigilance was the price necessary for all treasures, therefore he would, more than ever, sedulously guard the treasure of his Helen's love.

Yet he felt melancholy that a doubt of his secure happiness had been forced upon him, even as he was thankful he had been able to restrain himself, and had not injured Strathley. The less notoriety the better. There were more ways of passing a fence than leaping it. Strathley should be gotten rid of, but not by death. He would secure sufficient votes at the company's yearly meeting, to "down" his re-election. And once out of active service, Strathley would probably leave Mulketawne. If not, he would himself take Mrs. Ayres for a year or so in Paris.

A year's absence works wonders. Men losing sight of the one woman, fall into thinking of another, and thus, Strathley's fancy changing, he would simply be, what henceforth he must continue, a mere acquaintance. Above all, any contention must be avoided. In fact anything was desirable which could remove from Strathley's

mind the idea, that in any way, he had been associated in his, Ayres' mind, with his wife. Having settled the matter with Herbert Ayres, Reason had to hurry away in time to reach Hugh, whose long legs were moving very rapidly toward the Widow's comfortable corner in his private office.

Eunice looking happy and comfortable as she sat at work quieted his excitement and dispelled his idea of telling her of Ayres, of warning her against his slightest attention.

If he told her, what would be the result? She would probably leave the office, for he believed her too self-respecting to stay in a place where she might be thrown with such a man.

Would leaving the service of the Consolidated Milling Company insure so lovely a woman against the machinations of the base? No. Only a home, a husband, could do that, and Hugh's heart gave a quick throb, as thus the Widow's attractions were enhanced by another, the need she had for a protection, the especial need for his protection. Reason had no lengthy labor with Mr. Strathley, leaving him in the quiet command of himself, and enjoyment of the propinquity of Eunice Belling, whose face, bended over the caligraph, grew each moment fairer in his eyes.

Lastly Miss Belling was visited, as in the very worst of humors she had scolded her maid into tears, given Fido a slap that made that young gentleman's tail drag between his legs, and sent such a number of malicious thoughts flying, that had they not had invulnerable armor in their own health and natures, would have prostrated Eunice and Strathley beneath their force.

Miss Belling was not an easy subject for Reason to master, yet even Miss Belling and her will, were forced to submit.

"For," as the lady said aloud, when in her sacred privacy, "more flies are caught with molasses than vinegar. All men are vain fools, easily captured by a face, and easily turned from a purpose. He has taken a fancy to her, I have taken a fancy to him. My money will swell his money. My stock in the company will add very nicely to his. If I can only control myself, I can manage him! And once get him as I did Jim, right under my thumb, I'll defy any woman to get him out. But no more giving way to tempers. We'll," with a smile revealing her porcelain mouthpieces, "We'll keep that until we're married, eh Hugh? Helen Strathley, it sounds well! Mrs. Hugh Strathley sounds even better!"

## CHAPTER XV.

### “THE OPPOSITION WITHDRAWS.”

The morning after Mr. Ayres had reached his wise conclusions, he had occasion to visit the Company's mill, whence passing through the office, seeing Mrs. Belling at her desk, he paid his respects to her.

“You're very busy,” he said, after his greeting, feeling as most manly fellows do, a sympathy for a woman forced to self-support.

“Yes, sir,” she answered. And Eunice's brown eyes, or her cheerful face, or her occupation, or the gentleman's own integrity, reminded Mr. Ayres of his expressed determination to befriend her.

Perhaps each circumstance had its effect. At any rate the result was, that Mr. Ayres put down his hat, took a chair near Mrs. Belling's caligraph, and preceding his remarks by:

“Will you permit me to speak of your private matters?” received Mrs. Belling's permission.

He was silent a moment, considering how best he might begin, she watching him with questioning eyes.



"Mrs. Belling," said Mr. Ayres, kindly. "It is impossible for a man to see a woman making her own way in life, without feeling for her sympathy, respect, indeed sometimes, almost veneration. It does seem such an unnatural position. At least to such a man as I am, who believes in the old-fashioned notions about the relative positions of the sexes."

He paused, but Eunice did not speak. She had so many thoughts, she dreaded to open her lips, lest too great a number might rush out. So she clasped her hands tightly together, and waited for the gentleman to proceed.

"Of course, necessity forces her to work," Mr. Ayres was rather given to planning an argument and then working it out, "but if not necessary —"

"It is necessary. I have not a cent but what I can earn," Eunice spoke in a whisper.

"But, madam, you are the widow of a man known to be very well off," said Mr. Ayres.

"He did not leave me anything. You know this." Eunice was feeling a little bitter as she always did when her wrongs were forced upon her.

"But his will can be broken," suggested Mr. Ayres.

"I have no money to go to law," replied Mrs. Belling, whereat Mr. Ayres interrupted her with :

"That is the very point I wish to establish," and made her an offer which softened her heart with a knowledge that out of a friendless existence, she had passed into a life where kindness abounded. "That is the very point I wish to establish," said the gentleman, "so that I may serve you in the matter which, before I had the honor of making your acquaintance, I desired to do. In fact, I may say, I obligated myself to this course."

Ayres cleared his throat and went on, his matter-of-fact manner soothing the woman's nervousness. "We are all depending one on another," he said. "A favor from one can be returned to another, matters are thus equalized, and while none of us object to appreciation, there is very little need for high-flown sentiment, so when I offer you, in all sincerity, being abundantly able to do so, the necessary means for legally contesting the will of your late husband, I do it not only because any other gentleman would do so in my place ; but because I know the will can be broken, and your rights protected."

Still Eunice did not speak, unless the tears brimming over her eyes were words.

They affected Mr. Ayres as probably speech would not have done, though perhaps to an outsider, his words may not have shown it.

"I trust you will not lose your self control," he said. "The whole affair is very simply managed since all you have to do is to accept my offer, when I will introduce you to a lawyer. He will conduct the case, into which I will not enter, will not indeed speak further on the subject."

He waited for her answer, then noticing her agitation, "You need not answer now. Take time to think over it." he said rising.

Eunice rose also.

"No!"

She spoke with trembling lips and voice so low it barely reached the door, to which, at the moment, Hugh Strathley had arrived. Seeing Eunice's bended head, her tightly locked hands, the emotion expressed by her whole figure as she stood near Mr. Ayres, Hugh Strathley's heart was clutched by the "green-eyed monster," and he made his plaything.

"Villain!" he thought, "has he begun his machinations?" Then he backed into the office opposite his, which usually served as a private reception and consultation room, and threw himself

into a chair, waiting for the termination of the interview, which so greatly disturbed him.

"No;" that one word reached Hugh as Eunice spoke it.

"What has he dared to say?" he thought, as the soft murmur of Eunice's voice fell on his ear, telling of agitation but conveying no intelligible sound. "No!" she said, to Mr. Ayres. "I thank you for your offer, but I can not accept it. I have thought the matter over, and can now give you my answer. I have resolved not to contest the will."

"But, my dear madam! Are you not foolish to resign your rights. Choosing a life of labor, when you are entitled to, at least, a competence?" expostulated Mr. Ayres.

"I could only obtain it after endless annoyance and great expense," she spoke sadly.

Then she put her hand out, he took it, and she went on quickly.

"No, I can not accept your generous offer. I don't understand much about law, but I have heard that the richer contestant can carry a case from one court to another, until the poorer is crushed. And I know the woman who has this property would never cease the battle, until she



had conquered. I have had a hard fight all my life, am just free, and while I am not very young, still I have quite sufficient energy and health too, and I don't mind work. I don't mind anything, now I can be independent. Mr. Jim Jones and Mrs. Jones who, through you, kindly became my friends here, advised me to keep out of law. Doing so, if poor, I can be content. But once in a lawsuit, with its worries, and above all, its endless expenses increasing the debt I would owe you, could I be contented? Would you advise me to enter it?"

Viewed in this way Ayres honestly could not advise her to do so. Yet he felt it an outrage that she should not have her own, and told her so most emphatically.

"Ah, well!" she said, calmer now that she had decided, "it is easier to resign before a contest, than to suffer the sense of an unjust defeat. So," with a little smile, "the opposition withdraws, and is well satisfied to have regular work and kind friends."

Ayres pressed her hand warmly, feeling more interested than he had felt in any woman, other than his Helen, and trusting Mrs. Belling would never regret her decision, he left the office by the

side door, which being open, disclosed Mr. Strathley frowning as their eyes met.

It was a good chance to speak an indifferent word or so, and thus disabuse Strathley's mind of the belief that he, Ayres, had any idea of that gentleman's insane admiration for Mrs. Ayres. So Mr. Ayres nodded "Good morning" as if he barely knew Mr. Strathley, and saying :

"I have been empowered to say to you as the executor, that Mrs. Belling withdraws all opposition to the will," passed out of the building.

## CHAPTER XVI.

### “JIM SPEAKS.”

From the moment when Hugh had seen Ayres in a very earnest interview with Eunice Belling, and he had believed Ayres had begun his attentions, by which he hoped to sap the foundations of her honor, Hugh fell desperately in love. Even if Ayres did not succeed, these attentions would militate against Mrs. Belling, and this thought so exciting Mr. Strathley, his eyes flashed, his nostrils distended, making him look like the war horse that scented the battle afar, as he replaced Mr. Ayres in his position at the side of the Widow, determined at once to present his case to her most forcibly. Ordinarily Strathley's languid manner won his way into the regard of women. He had about him a certain chivalrous indifference, that, without spoken compliment, usually had a great effect with the fairer portions of humanity. They considered him “fascinating,” and generally agreed that a “woman might confide anything to Mr. Strathley.”

This one woman, Eunice Belling, must however

have formed a different opinion, or perhaps it was, that with her, Mr. Strathley was not the languid interesting man he was to her sisterhood.

Not that she found Mr. Strathley uninteresting. Indeed, Eunice's truthful heart told her he was far too interesting. Possibly it was this self knowledge that, when he entered the office after Mr. Ayres' exit, made Eunice guard her eyes and keep steadily at work as he stood looking down upon her without speaking a word.

She grew so nervous under his glance that presently she asked:

"Will you dictate this morning, or write instructions for the letters?"

Without answering, he sat down at his desk, fixing his ardent eyes upon her, as oblivious of his own expression, and that he was actually frightening Eunice, as is any man who is, for the first time, completely in the influence of that wicked love, who makes havoc with the quiet habits of quiet men.

"It is a dizziness which interferes with business" is an exact, if an inelegant diagnosis of that disease, which now so affected Hugh Strathley, that he not only couldn't work himself, but didn't want any one else to work.



The click—click—click of the caligraph so disturbed his nerves, that he caught Eunice's hand and brought the busy instrument to a sudden standstill.

Up to this moment Eunice's whole attention had been given to her effort to quell the very tumultuous throbbing of her heart, that somehow Mr. Strathley's presence had created.

But when she felt the touch of his hot fingers, that heart seemed like a bird that flew right from her bosom to his. Had she had no worldly experience, Hugh's wooing might have been written, "won," but having passed through a severe lesson, and knowing "things are not what they seem," she flushed very red, tried to look angry, and to pull her hand away.

In this however, she could not, for the moment, succeed, failing too in simulating anger at Hugh's low:

"I implore you, listen to me."

He would doubtless have followed these words by others, but that at the moment the under book-keeper, Mr. Jim Jones, came for some instructions, making him drop Eunice's hand and turn impatiently on the intruder with "what do you want?"

Jim looked first at Eunice then at Hugh, and though he only said:

“Mr. Strathley, shall the credit be continued?” his great hands doubled themselves as they hung by his side.

“O, I don’t care,” replied Hugh wearily. All that he did at the moment care about, being what he wanted to say to Eunice, he was recalled to business by the very sharp eyes of Jim Jones scanning him more sharply than ever before. Forced into action by those eyes, Hugh went with Jim to his desk, giving him his directions in his usual lucid manner.

Then, having been assisted to self control, he decided that he must do nothing precipitately, or he would offend Mrs. Belling and be rendered useless as a friend, so he returned to his own desk, temporarily rational, or as much so as is a man in the throes of the tender passion. When Mr. Strathley had, leaving Jim in the outer office, closed the door of his private office, a strange thing happened.

The very strangest that had ever occurred in the office of the Consolidated Milling Company.

Jim Jones spoke an unnecessary word, and then repeated it!

It was but one word, yet uttered so earnestly, that it filled the quiet room with echoes, and startled every man from his work.

"Never!" said Jim. "Never."

Every one looked at Jim, but, bending over his ledger, he looked at no one.

He worked away as quietly as ever, but, for the clerks counted them, he paid five visits to Mr. Strathley's office during that one afternoon. No one ever knew Jim Jones to be silly nor restless, nor had any one heard him ask a question, unless necessity forced it out of him. Yet the questions he that afternoon asked the manager were so utterly out of place, that finally Mr. Strathley, from being so continually interrupted, lost not only the thread of his thoughts, but also his temper.

"What's the matter with you?" he said at Jones' last appearance. "You don't seem to know what you're about. If you can't keep your books ask some one to help you."

Then feeling ashamed of his temper, Hugh followed Jim out on the door-step where, possibly because he was a little "off" to-day, old Jim had gone to breathe the fresh air.

"Are you sick, old fellow?" asked Hugh kindly.

The very fact that the two had started life together, and in the race for fortune, he had come out ahead, made Strathley all the kinder. "If you want to go home and rest up a bit, go and welcome. You deserve rest, Jim."

Jim's answer was a brief :

"No."

"All right then," said Hugh.

And because she was just now absorbing every thought, and it was a relief to talk of her, Strathley asked : "Mrs. Belling is lodging with your mother, isn't she?"

"Yes," replied Jim.

"I'm glad of it, glad of it," said Hugh, warmly. "A more kind-hearted woman doesn't live than Mrs. Jones. I must go to see her. Give her my love, Jim, will you?"

Jim didn't answer, and Hugh did not expect a reply, knowing Jim's peculiarity.

There was certainly nothing further to say, yet Hugh wanted to speak, to warn this great old Jim to look after the Widow, and keep all fascinating villains like Herbert Ayres out of her way when she was at home, and consequently in his care. As for the office, he would take that under his own especial charge. Ayres would have no fur-



ther chance there for private interviews. He would be down betimes, and never leave Mulketawne, never. If the lumber camp needed any direction somebody else might go. He, Hugh, had important work in town.

Now if Jim would see to the Widow at other times, Ayres' little game was spoiled; so Hugh proceeded to sound Jim.

"Jim," he placed his hand on Jim's shoulder; "I suppose you know that I feel a kindly interest in your mother's lodger, Mrs. Belling."

As he said this, Hugh looked the picture of ingenuousness, but Jim's sharp eyes seemed to see something objectionable, for a frown came to the colorless, fat face, and, whether by chance or intent, Jim moved so that Hugh's hand was forced to loose its friendly hold.

Still Hugh saw nothing unusual, for Jim was always queer, so he went on, asking the question:

"Do you feel friendly to Mrs. Belling?"

"Yes," answered Jim.

"Friendly enough to help her?" asked Hugh.

"Yes," replied Jim.

And now Jim's "yes" had such fervor that Strathley grasped his hand, although from Jim's position it was a decidedly awkward action.

"Honest old fellow," he cried, holding on to Jim's hand with his strong brown one, while every one of Jim's fingers were standing straight out, looking for all the world like pieces of wood. "Honest old fellow! Good old Jim! I feel just the same to you as when we were boys together," exclaimed Hugh.

Jim, made no echoing profession, but if that frowning white face and those sharp eyes expressed his feeling, Hugh's boyish affection must have been terribly misplaced. Still Hugh didn't see anything amiss, being in fact too much occupied with some other face to notice Jim's.

"Jim she is very beautiful," he said, thinking of that face.

Jim didn't speak, but shut his eyes and opened them suddenly, an old trick of his that had never failed to make Hugh laugh. Now, however, he was too serious, and there was never a bit of fun about Jim.

"Very beautiful," said Hugh again, and then, sadly, "poor and friendless!"

"No," swelled out from Jim's throat.

"No! Not friendless! Then you are her friend? You would protect her!" said Hugh greatly pleased.

“Yes.”

“You will not allow a man to hang around her who might have other than honorable intentions toward her? You will not allow a man to hang around her who might have evil intent? Eh, Jim?” he wanted to make it clear to Jim, quite satisfied with Jim’s reply.

“*Never.*”

Out it came like a full chorus from Jim’s great throat.

“God bless you Jim, God bless you.” Again Hugh grasped his great hand with its fingers sticking out like sticks, “God bless you.”

And Jim did not even say “Amen!”

Queer Jim!

## CHAPTER XVII.

### “STANDING BY EUNICE.”

There was a short conversation between Jim and his mother after Eunice had said good-night.

“Mother,” Jim’s voice had detained Mrs. Jones on her way up-stairs with Eunice, “Mother,” he repeated.

“Wal’, Jim?” And then the old lady had seated herself to “giv’” Jim his time.

He took considerable time, so long that Mrs. Jones picked up her knitting, but dropped it with a start at Jim’s next words.

“Hugh Strathley’s mad,” said Jim, each word so full and clear, that it really told the volumes words are sometimes supposed to tell.

“Mad!” screamed Mrs. Jones, her eyes widened to their greatest extent. “Lawk sakes alive Jim, not clean gone?”

Jim nodded.

“An’ him, sich a likely young feller! ever since he was a boy I liked Hugh. So fond o’ fried



cakes as he was too, seeh a sensible lad. Mad!" and the old lady began to cry.

Her tears dried, however, at Jim's next item of news.

"He's coming here," said Jim.

"What!" Mrs. Jones sprang to her feet. "He can't get in here!" And she ran to the front door, double locking it, as if Hugh were just outside pounding, demanding admittance.

"Lawk sakes alive, Jim, I'll be afeared to stay here alone," she whispered.

"For you no danger," said Jim.

"No," his mother sighed relieved. "He ain't violent then? Wal', that's a mercy. Poor Hugh! So fond o' fried cakes too," and finding something particularly affecting in this particular taste of the unfortunate Strathley, Mrs. Jones might again have relapsed into tears, but that Jim had yet another surprise for her.

"Mother," Jim's voice sank to the lowest, most musical mezzo voice.

There was in it the same musical mystery that the orchestra expresses when the stage villain is meditating his plots of destruction.

Mrs. Jones had never heard her son use this tone, and after the terrible announcement he had made, it fairly curdled her blood.

"What else?" she whispered, shuddering as if she saw a ghost, "What else Jim?"

"Eunice," he said, "stand by her."

"Will Hugh hurt her?" asked the trembling woman.

Jim nodded.

"O, the villain!" Then remembering that a mad man is not responsible, "Poor Hugh," she sighed, and her interest concentrating on Eunice "What'll she do, poor little gal? Lose her place?"

Jim shook his head.

"But he might hurt her up ter office," and Mrs. Jones' face was wrinkled into knots of anxiety. Smoothing out, however, with content, when softly, but no longer in that awful pianissimo Jim said:

"I am there!"

"So you are Jim, dear Jim! Yer'll pectect her! No, Hugh, nothing can hurt her ef yer be nigh. I see, Jim, yer be thar, I be here, and we'll both stand by Eunice."

At this Jim nodded, kissed his mother's cheek, bade her good night, and when she had gone stood quite still, just where she had left him, saying softly over and over the word, "never, never."

He started off in the early morning, not even waiting for breakfast.

"And I 'spects it's to them figgers he's gone, for while he didn't say much, he let on enough to show he be orful busy," Mrs. Jones told Eunice at breakfast. And then she gave her the history of Hugh's misfortune, beginning first with all the little anecdotes of his boyhood with Jim that she could remember.

"I know'd that lad when he warn't no higher'n that," measuring with her hand from the floor the statue of a most diminutive Hugh. "We was allers the best o' friends. Law sakes alive, I set in the front kerridge ter his aunt's funeral, an sech a hard time as we hed a comfortin' the little lad! Northin' could comfort him till I found out how fond he was o' fried cakes. He cried until I had the cakes, and then he was sort o' comforted. I kept on making cakes for him, allers ready with some when he comed home from boarding school. He was orful, orful sorry ter go and leave my Jim, they was allers the best o' friends, but when it comed ter figgers, Hugh w'an't nothin' ter Jim. No one is. But he allers remembered us. Never forgets them cakes and when he was made manager o' the Company, give'd Jim care o' the books. Lawk sakes alive, an ter think he's mad."

"Is—is he quite crazy?" Eunice asked timidly, adding, "He seemed all right. I never saw any one kinder and more gentle in my life, never!"

As she spoke, Eunice remembered Hugh's ardent looks of the previous day. Looks which had sent her heart beating. She imagined they expressed—well at least a warm interest, but if Mr. Strathley was mad, then, then, his eyes meant nothing.

Was he mad? She had had no experience with lunatics, but Hugh Strathley did not seem like one with wandering or unsettled reason.

"Are you sure he is mad?" she asked again.

"Sure!" Mrs. Jones replied, and then settled the matter by, "Jim said so."

"He seemed so quiet," said Eunice.

"Quiet! Lawd sakes alive, that's allers the way with crazy folks. There was a man who never spoke a word to no one livin' here in this town, and one mornin' he killed his wife an' six children," said Mrs. Jones, trembling with horror at her own story.

"How awful!" exclaimed Eunice.

"But you need not be afeared, Eunice," Mrs. Jones reassured her, "cause up ter office Jim'll stand by yer, an' down here, I'll do it."



“I’m not afraid” said Eunice “I’m not afraid, only I’m so very sorry, he seems such a nice gentleman, and is so, so handsome,” and down her pretty nose ran a tear of sympathy for Hugh’s misfortune.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

### “HUGH MAKES A CALL.”

Eunice looked so very pale that as Mrs. Jones was bidding her “Now look pert, an’ don’t say nothin’ ter excite him,” the old lady suddenly asked:

“Eunice, ain’t you afeard?”

To which replying “No,” very firmly, she started on her walk, arriving at the office before any other of the employes, except Jim, who was on his knees gathering up some shavings that must have been taken from the door between Mr. Strathley’s private office and the outer one occupied by the clerks. Jim nodded as he stepped aside for her to enter, and then, having made everything perfectly tidy, closed the door, leaving Eunice to her thoughts. They were very active, these thoughts of hers, and full of change.

First they rushed along desiring to see Hugh. How she pitied him. How careful she would be not to excite him.

Then her thoughts suddenly shifted to that awful maniac who had killed his wife and six

children. What would she do if Hugh tried to kill her? Call for Jim to help her and then send Hugh to an asylum? Never! She never would or could be the means of putting him in a dark cell or where inhuman men might abuse him.

At the bare idea Eunice became so exorcised that she felt like rushing out to Hugh's defense, and then she grew very anxious, for the hour of Mr. Strathley's arrival at the office had passed, and yet he came not.

Could he be ill? was—was it possible in a fit of dementia he had killed himself?

After she had been reduced to the depths of grief by this idea the Widow's common sense suggested that as Mr. Strathley was master, there might be no especial hour for him to commence his daily work, and that she had better begin to look to her, and not waste her time thinking of him, for he surely was not thinking of her. After which bit of counsel, Mrs. Belling began to make her caligraph go click-click as she replied to some letters that had been left upon her desk.

Yet Hugh had been thinking of her, most seriously thinking about her. Reasoning with himself as to the best and most manly way for him to serve her.

Now, as all his reasoning was only to convince himself he should do something that he wanted to do, he wasted a great deal of valuable time while pretending to read the paper after his breakfast. Arriving at the conclusion with which as a proposition he had begun his meditations, *i. e.*, that to prevent Ayres' having any opportunity to captivate Mrs. Belling it was his, Hugh's, duty to devote to her all the time he could spare from his business. And really, for a man who had kept himself so closely tied to the lumber industry in its varied branches, it was remarkable, now when there came this necessity to serve a "poor little widow," how much time he found he could have to spare.

He had thought so much of Eunice that he began to think of every one connected with her, Jim Jones coming in for a good deal of his interest. And after commencing with the idea that Jim was a good old fellow, and he was glad Eunice had such a friend, he ended by believing he had made a mistake in awakening any particular interest for her in Jim's mind.

"He'll love her himself; and what chances he has," thought Hugh.

Whereupon he decided it was the pleasantest



walk to the office by Mrs Jones' house, starting off at a good pace with the secret hope of meeting Eunice. But he had lost his chance, knowing when the clock struck eight that he had not been early enough this morning to catch the particular worm he sought.

He did catch one, however, an old one who was standing on the door step.

On seeing Hugh Mrs. Jones sprang into her house, slammed the door tight, then opened it enough to poke her head out—as she called, in an audible whisper: “Hugh, is that you?”

“Rather,” said Hugh, laughing at Mrs. Jones' queer antics, walking up to the house and putting out his hand, sure of his welcome.

But he wasn't welcome, for lo! bang came the door, and from the inside came Mrs. Jones' voice: “Go away now, Hugh! There's a good lad, go away.” Strathley stood puzzled for a moment. He was about to obey the old lady's behest, when again curiosity mastered and she peeped out of the crack to see if “he be gone,” as she whispered to herself.

When she found he had not, she cautiously opened the door a little wider, took a better survey of him and then: “Hugh,” she said, “yer do look natural.”

"Well, I'm glad of that," replied Hugh.

"Yer don't look a bit changed! Are yer, now speak the speak the straight truth, are yer violent?"

"When I'm not opposed, I'm the mildest man in the world," laughed Hugh.

He looked altogether so unviolent, that Mrs. Jones bidding him "wait a minit," ran into the kitchen and picking up a flat iron "ter hold handy case he's took with a fit," wrapped her apron about her hand concealing her weapon, and then opening the door bade Hugh "jest ter walk in."

He walked in out of pure good nature, but once entered in the sitting room, and Mrs. Jones began with:

"Eunice and me was talkin' of yer," there suddenly arose a charm that induced him to take a chair, and made him feel that Mrs. Jones was not so bad to talk to, indeed was agreeable, as long as she kept to that subject.

"You were talking of me?" he asked filled with interest. "What did she say?"

"Nothin'," replied Mrs. Jones.

"Oh!" was Hugh's disappointed ejaculation.

"She listened," amended Mrs. Jones.

"Ah?"

“Yes, I wos talkin’.”

“O Hugh,” the old lady burst out overpowered by her feelings.

“What is it, Mrs. Jones?” Hugh asked kindly.

“I hez allus stood your friend.”

“Indeed you have.”

“An’ yer wouldn’t turn on an ole ooman like me?”

The old lady was so earnest, one hand tightly closed, the other twisting nervously in her gingham apron, that though she made a comical picture Hugh didn’t laugh.

“She’s in trouble,” he thought. “Perhaps I can help her:” and aloud, “I never could turn on you Mrs. Jones. You have been a good friend always, and I never could forget that.”

“Wal’, then, then, don’t be violent to Eunice!”

“Be violent to Eunice?”

Hugh sprang to his feet. Up went Mrs. Jones’ flat-iron, her voice rising almost to a shriek.

“Be quiet, Hugh! Lad!” she cried, shaking the flat-iron in his face.

“She’s mad”, he thought.

“He’s nearly giv’ up,” she thought. “Arter all it’s the positiveness o’ a person as quiets them what’s cracked.”

And to convince Hugh she was very, very positive, she stared at Mr. Strathley fiercely, until water ran out of her eyes, looking so very funny with her upraised hand grasping the flat-iron that Hugh, unable to restrain his risibilities, fell back in a chair shouting with laughter. "I done it," thought Mrs. Jones proudly. "No doctor nor nuss, special fer lunattics couldn't hev done no better."

Then aloud to Hugh, "'Thar, thar! yer laughs jest as yer used ter do when yer was a boy, an' I'd look roun' ter see yer hadn't shaken nothin' from the mantle-piece. Lor sakes alive!" and Mrs. Jones began to laugh too, letting the flat-iron down on the floor to "res" thet arm a bit," and smoothing out the wrinkles in the neat gingham apron.

"Ah, yer wos allus a kind-hearted boy, Hugh," said the old Widow. "Sech good taste too. Do, yer remember them fried cakes? Lor' sakes alive! Wasn't I tellin' Eunice o' them cakes las' night, an' she 'lowed she'd like to hev some, so I jest started to cook 'em and giv 'em fer breakfus'! Would you like one now, Hugh?"

Running out to the kitchen and bringing in a plate of the rich bits of dough so much in favor



with Yankee epicures, urging him to "Jes' try 'em, fer, as I was tellin' Eunice—jest try 'em," and Hugh crammed his mouth full, anxious for Mrs. Jones to go on with her talk about Eunice.

"Sech a nice little gal as she is," said Mrs. Jones, nibbling at a fried cake, "I never seen sech a purty young widdy."

"Nor I," Hugh managed to say, nearly choked with his share of the fried cake, and wondering "where in thunder" he could dispose of the other cake Mrs. Jones had hospitably forced upon him, managing to slip it unobserved into the breast-pocket of his coat, but positively refusing to rob Mrs. Jones further when the old lady tried to coax him "jest ter take another."

"You were speaking about Mrs. Belling," Hugh reminded her.

"Wal," said the old lady, "Eunice is just like you. She do love to hear my stories. I thought last night she never would git tired o' hearin' me."

Hugh mildly wondered at Eunice's taste. It is wonderful, however, how immediately his opinion changed, when Mrs. Jones with an extra shake of her head and a chuckle:

"He! He!" went on to say, "Orful bright gal,

she jest sot an' sot, an' listened to me tellin' stories 'bout yer, Hugh, as ef I wor the wit o' the world."

"Did she? Did she, indeed?"

Hugh's interest became of the keenest, and then as certain memories of his boyhood returned, "I, I hope Mrs. Jones, dear Mrs. Jones, you told her I was a fine boy."

"Fine! He! He! Hugh, I couldn't tell no lie."

"Oh!" disappointment on the part of Hugh.

"I jest said you was orful nice," Mrs. Jones continued, oblivious of Hugh's former disappointment, but pleased at his fervent

"You good old soul to say that."

"Yes, an' she asked me ef yer was allus so handsome?"

"Did she say that?" asked Hugh, who never previously having given much thought to his appearance, became as suddenly delighted at this compliment as any old peacock.

"She did indeed. An' when I tol' her I 'lowed I was'nt no criterical o' beauty, but yer allus looked to me, with yer black skin and black hair like a wild Injun', though I ain't never seen one, least wise, not a wild one."

Here Hugh's vanity had a tumble almost equal

to Humpty Dumpty's, but arose like a phoenix from destruction, when Mrs. Jones, after much quiet chuckling, announced :

“ An' Eunice, she jest fell on my neck an' giv' me sech a hug, an' sed that she had allus loved black-faced wild Injuns' ”

“ Did she ? ”

Here Hugh's delight became so excessive that it is probable if Mrs. Jones had been younger and prettier, he too would have fallen as Eunice did, and have given her a hug to which Eunice's would have been as nothing. But Mrs. Jones was old, and Mrs. Jones was anything but pretty, and Hugh, well, having been very much more petted and spoiled than Eunice, much as he appreciated the old lady, he resisted the temptation to hug her.

He was, however, ready with his sympathy when from nodding her head and chuckling, the old lady began to look very doleful as she said :

“ An' now ter think it is all so changed. ”

“ Now don't be so sorry, Mrs. Jones, that I'm not now quite so bad as a wild Indian. ” said Hugh, trying to comfort her.

“ O, 'tain't that as made Eunice so pale. ”

“ Was she pale ? ” Hugh asked, at once starting off, determined to see Eunice and if she looked ill. “ Well, there'd not be a doctor in town, but— ”

Here Mrs. Jones interrupted his train of thoughts, following him to the door, laying her nervous old hands on his arm, and looking imploringly in his face as she said:

“Now Hugh, dear lad, I hez allus thought you was next bes’ ter Jim.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Jones.”

Hugh appreciated the greatness of this compliment from Jim’s mother.

“Yes, next ter Jim.” Mrs. Jones repeated, that there might be no doubt as to who was best. Then continuing more earnestly than before, “So dear lad, yer’ll promise me yer won’t do nothin’ ter hurt Eunice? Poor little gal, she hez hed sech a hard time.”

“I promise you, Mrs. Jones.” Hugh was as desperately in earnest as Mrs. Jones herself, holding her hand in his kind grasp, and saying:

“Believe me, I would rather die than any harm should befall Mrs. Belling.”



## CHAPTER XIX,

### “MRS. AYRES MAKES A CALL.”

“He do look han’some,” Mrs. Jones remarked to herself, watching Hugh stride away. And then, lest she be thinking treason against Jim: “Leastwise fur one o’ them blackskins. An’ he did look hones’ like when he sed thet ’bout Eunice. A leetle too sharp like, ’bout the eyes, though. I hopes,” doubtfully, “I hopes I can trus’ him. Lor’ sakes alive,” most triumphantly, “but I jest ken manage cracked people. Arter this experience I’d jes’ as leave keep a lunattic ’sylum.” And having looked down the street until Hugh disappeared around a corner, Mrs. Jones returned to her household cares. Putting the flat-iron carefully in place, and meditating about the feasibility of giving one to Eunice to take up “to offiss. ’case Hugh forgit an’ hev’ an attack,” deciding finally to ask Jim’s advice and abide by it, and giving another kind thought to Hugh, just as that gentleman, walking along Weston Avenue, *en route* for the office of the Consolidated Milling Company, was stopped by a lady much younger

and fairer than Mrs. Jones, and who, whether she was or was not full of kind thoughts, gave Mr. Strathley a most charming smile, and, moreover, held out toward him one of the tiniest and prettiest of gloved hands.

“Don’t run over me,” said this fair lady, with a sweet laugh, “I really” looking into his face with artless fun. “I really felt you were striding along as Mr. Hyde must have done, and I had to call out or be trampled under foot. What were you thinking of, looking neither to the right or left? of that sweet Widow! eh?”

Whether it was that Hugh was delighted to see anything so lovely as was Mrs. Herbert Ayres in her carriage toilet of blue velvet, or that he was overpowered by the lady’s open allusion to the Widow, but he certainly did hold Mrs. Ayres’ hand, well at least the fiftieth part of a second too long.

To Herbert Ayres looking from his office window this atom of time had seemed a sacrilegious age, making him sacrilegious as well, that is, if to say and mean it too, “D—d scoundrel. Dare to do that—open street—I’ll kill him.” be sacrilegious.

For Herbert Ayres chancing to go to his office

window and to see waiting at the corner the Ayres' handsome sleigh, had remained watching for his wife to leave the store, intending to join her and take a short outing, just for the sake of her company. He changed his mind, however, at the sight of her rencontre with Strathley, thrusting his hands in his pockets and deciding he must fight Strathley, that the entire world would not be big enough to hold them both since that "d——d scoundrel dared look so happy," as Hugh filled with thoughts about the Widow and barely thinking at all of Mrs. Ayres, escorted her to her sleigh and tucked the robes carefully about her.

That Mrs. Ayres turned that lovely blonde head away cutting short Mr. Strathley's adieux, and looked most earnestly toward her husband's office only made that gentleman more indignant.

"Does she think I'd play the spy on her," he thought, softening though at once as he had a way of doing where his Helen was concerned, and saying tenderly, "Poor little thing! That she should feel anything to make her fear a spy," and then Mr. Ayres grew savage at her neglect when the fair lady, great sleigh, and fine team, went down the road, utterly oblivious of the fact that he had himself particularly told Mrs. Ayres not

to call for him before lunch hour. She remembered it though, running up the stairs and tripping into the room just as bright and variable as a day in springtime, at twelve precisely. "Oh Herbie!" she exclaimed, patting his cheek, for she had told Mary she was going to be "awfully loving to Herbie." "Oh, Herbie, I've had such a delightful time. I called on that hateful, spiteful old maid, Helen Belling, just to show her she needn't pity *me*. Oh, Herbie, it was too funny. Ha! Ha! Ha!"

And off into the sweetest laughter went fair Helen, so full of her news that she didn't notice that her husband was perfectly serious.

"Too, too funny! I just sailed into Miss Belling's parlor, took the very biggest chair, sat on one foot to make me taller, held my head back, and hoped I saw her well, trusted that Mulketawne had not given her the rheumatism, that Aunt Jane, my father's Aunt; I was very particular to say my father's Aunt, Herbie, you remember her, Herbie? the old cat, you named Aunt Jane yourself behind her back, and said you were awfully glad when she went; so you needn't pretend you've forgotten," Mrs. Ayres grew very emphatic.

Her husband, forced to give an answer, said



very dignifiedly, that he remembered Mrs. Ayres' father's aunt.

"That's all right," Mrs. Ayres replied, laughing again as she continued her story. "My father's aunt, I did put that strong, Herbie. She had to see I meant to say she herself was an old thing. My! How mad she was! She looked as if she'd like to wither me up. But I wouldn't wither a bit, for I took a peep at myself in the glass, and I looked quite grand. You'd have been proud of me, Herbie."

"I am proud of you," Mr. Ayres said solemnly, whereat Mrs. Ayres called him a "dear," and threw him a kiss with the tips of her fingers.

"Then," she went on, "I inquired if she ever suffered with neuralgia in her teeth," looking at her false ones as innocently as a baby. O Herbie! if you ever loose your money I'll go on the stage, for I'm convinced, since this morning, that I'd make a magnificent actress. I really would. But hear what Miss Belling said: She said she liked Mulketawne much better than the people, that she thought she'd remain here, and import a colony of sensible women and virtuous men. O, but wasn't I mad. But I didn't let her see it. No, indeed! I just begged her to carry out

her plan for my husband was so tired of being alone in morality. And I, I really wanted to see one sensible woman before I died.

“Just then that precious darling Fido who had been taking a doze on the sofa at Miss Belling’s side did the cunningest thing! What do you suppose it was, Herbie?”

“I can not imagine, dear,” replied her husband.

“How delightful you are!” exclaimed Mrs. Ayres, “you never know anything I don’t want you to know.”

At which speech sudden sadness smote Herbert Ayres’ kind heart.

But Mrs. Ayres didn’t know that, hurrying to say: “I hate these people who always guess one’s riddles and know one’s stories, you never do, Herbie, you’re so — but I’ll tell you this trick of that lovely Fido’s. He just poked his dear little nose in Helen Belling’s pocket, and before she could catch him, ran away with a letter.

“When I saw that old cat turn red under her powder, I just made up my mind I’d see that letter, so up I sprang and chased Fido round and round, Miss Belling trying to stop me.

“‘If you please Mrs. Ayres,’ she called, but I wouldn’t please.

“ ‘Mrs. Ayres I will attend to—’

“Now although the old cat fairly screeched this, I pretended not to hear. Running around chairs and slipping by Helen Belling, I cornered Fido under the table, where he began to bark and dropped the letter, and I picked it up.

“Whom do you suppose it was to Herbie,” asked Mrs. Ayres, her eyes fairly jumping with fun.

“I don’t know dear,” replied her husband solemnly!

“Do guess!” She coaxed.

“I can not imagine.” Mr. Ayres was still perfectly serious.

“Well then, I’ll tell you,” Mrs. Ayres nodded triumphantly. “It was to Hugh Strathley.”

“Would you oblige me, my dear,” interposed her husband, “by prefixing that gentleman’s name with Mr.”

“Certainly” replied Mrs. Ayres. But not now. Can’t waste the time. So much to tell! just listen. Well, ha! ha!”

Mrs. Ayres stopped a moment or so to laugh, and then went on, little gurgles of merriment breaking through her words.

“O!” I said, as I handed Miss Belling the

note all soiled and torn by Fido's darling little teeth. 'O, it's too bad, such pretty writing, and all wasted! It's really too bad, Miss Belling. If now I'd only known you wanted to see Mr. Strathley, I could have told him. We had a lovely chat just a minute ago!' Why, Herbie dear, what's wrong?" Mrs. Ayres inquired anxiously, for at her allusion to her rencontre with Hugh, Mr. Ayres started as one might with a twinge of neuralgia.

Quieting himself, however, and answering his wife very quietly: "Nothing is the matter with me, my dear."

"So glad," replied Mrs. Ayres, and then, "Where was I? Oh yes, I was saying 'Mr. Strathley and I had a lovely chat together;' but not in that tone, of course, you know, Herbie. I just rolled my eyes in this sort of fashion, and made the word lovely roll out of my mouth with—Herbie, really something is wrong with you?"

"I assure you not, my dear," replied Mr. Ayres.

Mrs. Ayres looked at her husband with the most solicitous blue eyes—such lovely eyes! and then satisfied; for really, except being excessively serious, Mr. Ayres did look in remarkably good condition, she returned to her story, laughter dimpling her rosy cheeks.



“ ‘I *am* so sorry I didn’t know you wanted Mr. Strathley, I repeated, for I wanted her to say something. ‘I could have brought him right along with me. I assure you he would have been glad to come, for we were talking on such an interesting subject.’ And here Miss Belling, who had been opening and shutting her mouth like one of those fish in the aquarium, snapped out, ‘I’ve not the least doubt of it, Mrs. Ayres; from what I could see I should say Mr. Strathley would willingly have come with you.’ Now, Herbie, that wasn’t an ugly speech, but Helen Belling has such an ugly way of saying things. Or perhaps it’s that mouth. She certainly has a horribly ugly mouth. At any rate, I felt so angry when she said that, that I wished I were a real old cat and could scratch out her eyes. But at the moment when I was at my very maddest, who should pass by the window but Mr. Strathley? See, Herbie, dear, I didn’t forget the Mr. this time. Well, who should pass but Hugh Strathley? I immediately tapped on the glass and beckoned him in, for I was determined to show Miss Helen Belling that I did not exaggerate. I wouldn’t do such a thing, would I, Herbie?”

Mrs. Ayres did not wait for her husband’s

reply. It was well she did not wait, for at that moment his wrath at Miss Belling's insinuation, and dire vengeance against Hugh, would have prevented speech.

"Indeed I would not exaggerate," Mrs. Ayres asserted fiercely, and then mitigated her assertion by "at least I'd only do it for a bit of fun. I had fun then! Indeed I did, for when I beckoned to Mr. Stratley, and he had to come in, I told him right in Helen Belling's face: 'Miss Belling wanted you, Mr. Strathley,' so innocently that you wouldn't have believed butter could have melted in my mouth. O! Herbie, ha! ha! It was too funny for anything. Mr. Strathley bowed in the stiffest manner to Miss Belling and Miss Belling bowed to him. I knew that he was thinking of what she said yesterday in your office. I knew, too, what she was thinking of! Any goose could see that she'd give her eyes to catch him. But she can't. He's already caught I can tell that much to that spiteful old Helen Belling."

During this speech, Mr. Ayres' feelings may be more easily imagined than described.

The perfectly artless manner in which Mrs. Ayres alluded to Strathley's mad passion, for a

moment staggered Mr. Ayres. Could she be a hardened creature? But anything less like a hardened reprobate than Mrs. Ayres in her exquisite youth and Parisian toilette can not be conceived.

"She does not as yet understand his feelings," thought her husband. "Heaven keep her in ignorance."

With more fervor than Herbert Ayers would have believed possible he uttered this prayer in the secret recesses of his heart, while his wife chatted away, winding up with:

"And when I was sure that Mr. Strathley and Miss Belling were as uncomfortable together as could be, I bowed to Hugh Strathley, gave that darling Fido a hug, stood on tiptoes and made Helen Belling stoop over while I kissed her on both cheeks, taking care to make a little spot with each kiss where I rubbed off her powder, and then saying '*Adieu*'! in my most elegant manner, drove off for you."

"Now what do you think of me?"

## CHAPTER XX.

### "MRS. AYRES ENJOYS HER LUNCHEON."

What he thought of her he didn't say, but looked volumes, in fact a whole encyclopedia, responding to Mrs. Ayres' "Let's go to lunch," in a very serious manner, but attending her to the sleigh and looking after her small comforts with such solicitude, that in reaching home the sprightly young lady ran up to her bedroom, summoned the devoted Mary to attend her in the arduous duty of removing her hat, and whispering:

"Mary, I've followed your advice! I've not said a word about the Widow to distract his attention from me. And oh, he's just too serious and attentive for anything," ran quickly away, to call out from the head of the stairs.

"M-a-r-y!"

"Yes, lamby!"

It was marvelous what quick time Mary made in reaching her mistress, who only wanted to whisper:

"You just wait in my room: I'll run up as soon



as he goes and tell you all about it! I must tell somebody, or I'd burst. Don't stir, will you, Mary?"

"No, lamby, I won't!"

And down the steps tripped Mrs. Herbert Ayres, perfectly secure that were Mulketawne with all its inhabitants—past, present and future—to order Mary out of that particular bed room, she'd—well, she'd see them further, and then she wouldn't move.

And she didn't move out of that room, although Mr. and Mrs. Ayres took a good hour and a half to discuss their luncheon, and then stood in the hall below talking in low voices for a half hour, and finally stood at the open door—Mary might have known the door was open from the chill breeze blowing through the house—for a still longer period of time. What any one might think of such conduct on the part of Mr. Herbert Ayres, was of no consequence to Mary. She, faithful creature, if she thought at all about so insignificant a person as the husband of her "lamby," rather approved of his imprudent exposure of his head as he talked to Mrs. Ayres, hat in hand, leaving the wind to play as it would, and chill the little place on the top of his cranium, which Helen Ayres in her love fits called "that dear little bald spot."

Yes, Mary, if she had thought of him, would have given him her commendation; for was not her "lamby" enjoying herself? Sending out, every little while, one of her sweet laughs?

Mary's severe countenance softened into a smile at the musical sounds, and then she looked eagerly at the door, for Mrs. Ayres, calling "Good-bye, Herbie," in a rather lack-a-daisical tone, ran up the stairs through that doorway and jumped into Mary's arms, showing all her pretty white teeth as she laughed, and then squeezing her lips into a very rosebud of ecstasy as preface to the exclamation, "Oh, Mary! He's a love!"

Then Mrs. Ayres sighed and rolled up her eyes, and then, charmingly pretty in everything she did, threw herself in a chair, suffering Mary to change her costume, while she talked on as fast as her very nimble tongue could run. "Oh, Mary! It is too delightful! Herbie and I are getting so, so romantic. It's like being courted over again. Did you hear me sing a little bit of 'Some Day' just now?"

Of course Mary said "Yes." "I just hummed it, you know, Mary." Mrs. Ayres raised herself long enough for Mary to slip the blue velvet pelisse off of her pretty form and then fell back again re-

peating, "I just hummed it, dwelling *awfully* long on those words, 'Who should sue, and who forgive.'

"I saw Herbie standing in a darkened corner of the parlor, looking handsome enough to eat. But I pretended not to see him, starting just as if he'd frightened me, when he came up softly behind and put his arm around me.

"My, what a kiss he gave me! Such a romantic, passionate kiss! It was perfectly delightful. And then he sighed, and patted my head and said, 'O!' too tenderly for anything! In a perfect Romeo tone: 'My poor little beauty,' he sighed. And then I sighed and snuggled up to him, and then Jane announced lunch. I feared the romance would all die with eating, but it grew and it grew—O, just too lovely for anything!

"Herbie asked if I'd like some champagne; said he thought it might give me an appetite. I was hungry enough then to have eaten a house, but I wasn't going to let on, so I just said 'perhaps,' and then *very* softly, 'for, Herbie, I don't feel *too* well.'

"'Are you ill, my darling!' He not only asked this in the most interested way, but actually got up and touched my wrist to see if I had a fever.

"O! how I did try to make my pulse go quick!

Just held my breath until I strangled nearly. But I don't suppose I accomplished anything, for presently, with the softest little pat he let my hand go saying, 'Thank God darling, nothing serious.'

"Then I gave an awful sigh, and he sighed too. Then the wine went pop, and I was busy sipping mine before it ran over the glass. But Herbie, before touching his lips to his, looked at me in *such* a way! It was splendid!

"Of course you know, Mary, he's always polite. But *this* was something grand. I had to be grand too, so we just went on bowing our heads to each other like the great China mandarin you bought me when I was a child. Oh! It was too lovely!

"But I nearly spoiled it all," with a serious nod.

"Why don't you ask me why, Mary? You are too provoking; I don't believe you take a bit of interest in me," said Mrs. Ayres, impatiently. At which cruel assertion Mary fairly groaned. She did her best to make her "lovey" believe that all in the world which was of interest to her, was that dear bit of humanity before which she was kneeling, caressingly rubbing her pretty feet.

"But you know, lovey," said Mary, when after much coaxing the little frown had smoothed



itself from Mrs. Ayres' brow, "you know you don't like me to interrupt you."

"Sometimes I do," promptly replied Mrs. Ayres. "But now, if you *really* want to hear, I'll go on. Where was I? Oh, yes; about the yawn. Well, I nearly gave one, for I was beginning to grow sleepy, the champagne and the romance being too much for me. I caught myself up though, and turned that yawn into a perfectly thrilling sigh. I wish you could have heard it. Why, it affected Herbie so that he drew his chair close to mine—Jane had left the room, and we were alone—he just drew his chair awfully close, and asked me in the sweetest voice, that made me sigh.

"Of course I would'nt, at *such* a moment, have told him I was sleepy, would I Mary?"

"Certainly not my lamby."

"So I didn't say anything. And then, Mary, in the most touching manner, a regular Claude Melnotte manner, Herbie said, 'Helen, my wife, are you sad?'"

"Did he deary?" For Mary, finding her mistress wanted some rejoinder, was equal to the emergency and interrupted just on time.

"Yes, indeed," replied fair Helen. "Mary I

felt as if I were the Lady of Lyons, or some of those lovely romantic creatures! I became deeply affected myself. Tears actually filled my eyes, as I said 'Herbie I am happy if you are happy.' And he said he would rather be dead than make me unhappy. Then he sighed. O! awfully deep, from the very tip of his boots. And I sighed, O! fearfully! And then he asked if he could do *any* thing in the world for me. And then I just shook my head so, from side to side, as I saw Frou Frou do before she died. And then he said 'Darling is there anything in the world you want?' And O! Mary, then Herbie began looking at me in such a searching manner as if I had some secret sin or as if I was about to commit a murder, or to jump over Niagara."

"O, lovey!" Mary interposed.

"Don't interrupt Mary," cried her mistress. "Yes, just as if I were a delightful criminal of some kind or other. I did try awfully to think of some horrible thing I wanted. Like that girl in the Bible who asked for the head of John the Baptist. But I didn't want anybody's head chopped off, except Helen Belling's, and I wouldn't want that, you know! Just think how awful she'd look, to have her head with its powder and

frizzes served up on a silver dish ! I shuddered when I thought of it, which made Herbie ask me again, 'Tell me, is there anything you wish?' when, what do you think, the most delightful thing popped into my head, and I said, solemnly, 'Herbie, there is one thing that will make me supremely happy.' 'You shall have it, darling ! I swear you shall.' These were his very words, Mary : 'You shall have it, darling, if it takes every cent I have. Tell me?' Then I said, 'I want that lovely little dog of that hateful Helen Belling's. His name is Fido, and O Herbie, I can never be happy without Fido !' And then he just crushed me with such a lovely hug, and said I should have him if he had to give every cent he had. Now, isn't that splendid?"

## CHAPTER XXI.

### “HUGH DEPENDS, AND OFFENDS.”

While the fair Helen was reveling in the romance that had entered into her satisfactory but rather prosaic married life, her lord and master was considering affairs in the light of what he called his “horse sense.”

His wife was so artless that to associate her with an intrigue was impossible; nor was Hugh intriguing!

There could be nothing more damnably frank than his declaration that he meant marriage! Cold beads of sweat rose to Herbert Ayres' head. He had heard of many extraordinary things, but never anything equally extraordinary. If he could in some way get rid of Strathley! He didn't really wish to kill him, for when Hugh had said, “I hold my life as nothing when weighed with her happiness and honor,” a certain chord in Ayres' kind heart had responded.

No, he did not wish to kill Strathley, and yet less did he wish to be killed by him. With him dead, Helen would fall into Strathley's arms.



By Jove! that was too horrible.

Ayres walked up and down the office several times before he could recover from such a possibility. When he retook his seat he had enveloped himself in his "horse sense."

The best way to accomplish best results was practically to consider how to carry out his plan of, through business, forcing Hugh out of Mulketawne.

He must manage those votes. But how? Hugh owned five hundred shares, which offset his own five hundred. The scattered shares he could obtain, but then Jim Belling's! How was he to get at those?

It was a pity the Widow wouldn't contest. He might have had more chance there, having a sort of claim on the Widow. The matter of managing these votes did not seem easy; the alternative—Paris, and a year or so of travel—seeming the more feasible, as Mr. Ayres said aloud, "If the fellow weren't such a d——f—— this would never have occurred," at the same moment that Hugh was privately anathematizing himself, asking himself mentally why he had walked up Weston avenue; why he had passed the hotel, and then really forgetting Mrs. Ayres' charms and deciding

she had overstepped the boundary when she had forced him into this visit to Miss Belling. So actively thinking that he did not speak as he stood looking, it must be admitted rather fiercely, at Miss Belling until—

“O!” exclaimed this kitten of two hundred avoirdupois, shrugging her shoulders and trying to blush, “Don’t look at me so, you embarrass me,” and Hugh immediately looked away.

He was about to speak, to leave his “ward.”

With what irony that name he had given Miss Belling kept on recurring to his mind, when she, in her infantile manner, a burlesque of Helen Ayres, demanded,

“Now! What made you look away? That’s just like a man. No moderation. ‘If my glances have betrayed.’ We understand them, don’t we Fido?” as that canine jumped on his mistress’ lap.

She had chosen the chair between the door and Mr. Strathley, coquetting as might an elephant, talking to Fido and at Hugh.

“Such triflers, Fido, these wicked men. We understand them, but they don’t understand us. Dear Jim used to say, ‘Helen, my dear, you will never find any one to appreciate you but Hugh.’ We always called you Hugh when we spoke of

you, which was so often. It seems so strange now I really know you, to call you Mr. Strathley."

She started up, playfully holding Fido out to him. Hugh stepping back, said stiffly :

"Pardon me, Miss Belling, but pressing business compels me to leave," was interrupted by Miss Belling's declaration :

"Pressing business forces me to detain you. Pray be seated. O, do sit down for a moment ; I can not talk unless you do," which in the desperate hope of shortening the interview forced Hugh into a chair, while she, clever as she was, did not imagine she was anything but attractive to him. She really believed his concession was a triumph, and murmured with a "killing glance,"

"How kind of you ! But Jim told me you would do anything for me."

How Hugh did mentally swear at Jim ! What an unconscionable liar the fellow must have been !

He waited for a moment, and then to put an end to this odious *let-a-lete* as Miss Belling seemed to have forgotten what pressing business she had intended to introduce. Hugh said :

"I suppose, Miss Belling—"

"Call me Helen," said Miss Belling, "my friends always call me Helen. Dear Jim—"

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But Hugh could not endure another word about Jim, breaking in upon the lady's speech with :

"Pardon my interrupting you, but I really have so little time. I believe you would feel more comfortable if I tell you, that I have put this matter of your brother's will in my lawyer's hands, and as soon as certain bills are attended to, the estate will be settled, for I have been informed that Mrs. Belling does not intend to contest the will."

"Contest the will?" Miss Belling's voice rose high, and then she brought it back to its usual tone, "Really, Mr. Strathley, that creature is too impertinent. To think of contesting my brother's will. By what right?"

"By the right of wifedom."

Hugh spoke quietly. There were, however, certain lines about his dark moustache and a certain light in his eyes that foretold danger. "By the right of wifedom," he repeated firmly. "It may seem presuming to an heir, but the law is ready to protect the rights claimed by a woman, acknowledged as a wife."

"My brother never acknowledged this creature."

Now there was a marked change in Miss Belling's dulcet tones. She also arose to her feet,



folding her arms on her breast, looking, with her strongly marked face, iron will everywhere visible, an Amazon who might inspire a little wholesome dread.

But she didn't affect Hugh in the slightest. He went on very calmly with his reply.

"I am sorry to be forced to contradict Miss Belling, yet I must state that Mr. Jim Belling acknowledged Mrs. Eunice Belling to me as his wife; I remember the name, it being rather an uncommon one."

"Did he ever present her to you as his wife?" asked Miss Belling quickly.

"No," admitted Hugh. "I did not, previous to your brother's death, have the honor of personal acquaintance with Mrs. Belling."

"How do you know this woman you call Mrs. Belling is the one alluded to by my brother?" How Hugh wished that Miss Belling was in reality the old dragon to which he mentally likened her.

In truth just now, between her dull protruding eyes, and wide mouth, and above all, those sulphurous words that were seeking to besmirch a reputation, the heir of Jim Belling was not unlike that mythical monster. Ah! if she were! Straightway

Hugh would have cut off that very head, Helen Ayres declared to Mary would have looked so terrible, and have laid the trophy at Eunice's feet. Alas! this was no mythical creation, but a real flesh and blood monster of the nineteenth century. And instead of bravely fighting for his lady love, Hugh had now to stop and think, weighing well his words, lest by his defense he injure that brown-eyed woman for whom his heart was beating.

"How do you know that this person is the one alluded to by my brother?" repeated Miss Belling.

"It is not to be presumed that Mr. Belling would put himself in the position of a self-confessed bigamist, Miss Belling, claiming two wives."

"Bigamist!" exclaimed Miss Belling, "Is living with doubtful characters bigamy?"

"Madam," said Hugh, "you must pardon me if I decline to discuss this matter. I can, however, assure you of one thing, that your brother, some years ago, gave a proof of belief in his wife's integrity, which will necessitate the proving that Mrs. Eunice Belling, type-writer in the office of the Consolidated Milling Company, is the true Mrs. Eunice Belling."

"Why must this be proven?" asked Miss Bell-

ing, fixing her cold eyes on Hugh in a fishy stare.

“As that is Mrs. Belling’s business, and not mine, I am not at liberty to mention it.”

There was a moment’s silence, during which Miss Belling thought deeply, and Hugh wondered what the “old dragon” would next “spit out.” What she did surprised him, for, extending her hand, the only handsome thing about her, she said, quietly :

“I will be obliged to you if you will attend to my matters, and have them settled as soon as possible.”

But when Mr. Strathley had closed the door and Miss Belling’s maid chanced to enter the lady’s parlor—whack !—such a blow as the unoffending creature received on her ear, while Fido, from the impulse of his mistress’ slipper, ran howling under the sofa.

## CHAPTER XXII.

### "UP TO MISCHIEF."

As soon as Hugh reached the office, before he entered his private room he opened the iron closet wherein were stored the company's books, and after searching for something he grew quite radiant, as he carefully assured himself that the entry he sought was correct, and in the long line of entries from that date had never been altered.

"That'll fix the old dragon," he said. Then he must have thought of another "she," for immediately he said, "bless her," in a very tender way. Satisfied with his investigation, he stepped across the hall, opened his own door, and with an eager stride or two was at Eunice's side holding out his hand to her, when c-r-e-a-k went something, and open swung the door to a good wide crack, through which from his corner, looked the sharp eyes of Jim Jones.

Hugh had been guilty of no worse thought than that of shaking hands with Eunice, yet here they were both *en tableau* with very red faces, and Hugh with a very angry heart. He had



only been about to shake hands with a lady, the lady in the world to him. Yet—yet—probably because she was so dear to him, and because of these very serious intentions that had been sprouting so vigorously, Hugh became painfully conscious that it was unbusiness like, to say the least, his offering his hand to his secretary after so short an absence as one night, and—and—“Devilish shame!” he muttered, between his closed teeth, “It might look queer! They might blame her!”

He turned savagely to see what other eyes besides Jim Jones’ had had the enjoyment of the picture of Mrs. Belling and himself, but either from the peculiar position of Jim Jones’ desk, or the crank of the door to open at a certain angle; no other of the outside clerks had known, or been able to see the blushes fade from Eunice’s face, or his own transition from pleasure to annoyance.

Hugh looked fiercely at Jim.

But old Jim didn’t waver. Keeping those sharp little eyes on Hugh as if they were boring into his inmost thoughts.

“D—d impertinent,” muttered Hugh, making a step to slam the door in Jim’s face. Then he hesitated. Just now he had in his care a price-

less, a delicate thing,—the reputation of her he loved.

Were he to close that door what would Jim think? He was a good old fellow, yet he was a man. So the door was left open until a boy coming in with a message, was told to close it and look sharp to keep out draughts.

Their privacy restored by the closing of the door, Hugh turned to Mrs. Belling an ardent face that made her heart go thumpetty-bump, though all he said was:

“Mrs. Belling, do you remember, during the last six years, ever placing your signature to any papers at the request of Mr. Jim Belling?”

“I wouldn’t do it,” said Eunice her brown eyes growing fiery. “He asked me, he insisted, he raged, but I wouldn’t do it.”

“You didn’t!” exclaimed Hugh, “Let me congratulate you.”

And purely, you know, as a matter of congratulation, Hugh took a step from his desk to Eunice’s, grasping both of her hands and holding them very close, when he trod on a certain board, and *c-r-e-a-k* went that villainous door, with Jim on the alert, watching! He didn’t see Eunice’s face; but Hugh’s was in full light, eager, hand-

some, the fire in his eyes making old Jim double up his fists under his desk, making him, when the door was again closed, get down from his seat, advance to that door and boldly pushing it open, enter.

Woe to Hugh if he had been in any but the most respectable of attitudes. Woe to him! For Jim's fists were hard as iron. But Hugh was only sitting at his own desk talking to Mrs. Belling, who was at hers.

"If you will allow me to manage this affair for you, and explain it afterward, I believe you will be spared anxiety, and I certainly—"

Here Jim's "Any directions, sir?" as well as his huge person, interrupted Mr. Strathley.

"About what, Jones?" was Hugh's rejoinder, somewhat impatiently made.

"Entries," was Jim's remark.

"No," said Hugh, and not waiting for Jim to leave went on with,

"If you will allow me to attend to this business matter I will be most happy."

It sounded all right to old Jim, yet he wasn't satisfied, walking out into the sunshine, intoning in a whisper the inquiry:

"Up to mischief?" And then, as a sort of an-

swer as to what under such circumstances he ought to do, doubling up one fist, dashing it into the other hand with such a "liff" it started echoes.

Quiet old Jim. But a determined, aye, a dangerous fellow.



## CHAPTER XXIII.

### “BUSINESS.”

There followed a great many business conversations between Eunice and Hugh. Some letters were written; some persons arrived from Beloit by one train going with Hugh to an office making certain affidavits, were escorted to the returning train by Mr. Strathley, who appeared to them the most affable and agreeable of men.

There was so much business between the typewriter and her employer that they grew into the most delightful condition of dependence and protection; Hugh's madness, Mrs. Jones' still insisting on it, only remembered by Eunice as a necessity for self control, which she thought she managed famously.

Perhaps now it came easy for her to control her quick impulses, since at the Jones' cottage the old lady never tired of saying, “You is the peartest little gal,” and Jim did not contradict his mother, contenting himself with watching Eunice over the edge of his evening paper. Eunice had grown quite used to being watched by Jim. He meant

it kindly, she knew; he was always kind in every way, and so she did not blush or start when the sharp little eyes were fixed on her. Barely noticing them in fact, or when she did, giving a nod and smile in return.

Yes, perhaps with all this kindness from the Joneses Eunice did not deserve much credit that her anger never rose, and her heart fell into peacefulness. Then the Joneses were not the only kind ones, for could any one be more kind than Mr. Strathley? Not possibly. Why, he made her feel like a queen, and not an employe. And she was so happy, so very happy. Their business talks, such delightful conversations. Eunice had never before rightly estimated business. Now she did, however, enjoying every hour she passed at the office of the Consolidated Milling Company. For Hugh, mindful of those fried cakes, and not willing, until the Widow was mistress of the position, to take, as it were, any unfair advantage and press his suit, kept his interviews strictly to the office.

That miserable door did greatly interfere, requiring the constant attention of a carpenter; still, even with that creaking door, Hugh managed to enjoy this brief waiting, having of course perfectly convinced himself that Ayres had relin-

quished his base designs. In fact Ayres had resolved himself into an attendant on his wife. They were always driving together, walking together, and he had even been told, for Hugh did not go much into society just now, *dancing* together. Hugh laughed at the idea of Ayres' dancing, yet he approved of his conduct, and commended him secretly for his noble effort to control his mad passion for Eunice.

He flattered himself that by this time Eunice was quite safe.

She had never said a word.

Bless her, she was far too proud.

But those eyes! Had they not returned the looks his eyes sent out? As for being jealous of old Jim, Hugh laughed at that now. Good old Jim! Steady as an old grandfather. Love wasn't for him. So Hugh held his tongue quiet, showing his love though, in various ways, and looking eagerly forward to the business matter, which settled, he would boldly test his fate.

Others were attending to business as well as Hugh.

Ayres was not doing much on his private account, trusting a little to his "luck" for getting control of the votes for Miss Belling's stocks, but not openly seeking them.

And Miss Belling was not idle. Her affairs had been settled, she was in possession of her estate and had given Hugh his release. But before she had done so she had asked some private questions of the lawyer; for in all her deeds, securities, etc., she had found nothing relative to the stock of the Consolidated Milling Company.

The lawyer had explained at some length that the Consolidated Milling Company, like other such companies, had a regular charter; that its entries were, except when stock was transferred or re-transferred, when documents became necessary; entered on the Company's books, as well as in the charter, where the several stockholders' names were put on record. That if Miss Belling desired she could assure herself of this by looking over, or directing some one to look over the books, which, as Jim Belling was known to be one of the original founders of the Company, Mr. Strathley had probably not considered necessary.

When Miss Belling was satisfied on this point, and entirely out of Hugh Strathley's power, she made a business call at Mr. Ayres' office.

"I will fix you," she said, viciously, thinking of Hugh and Eunice, "I will fix you." Then she made what she considered her great move, or-



dering her sleigh to stop at the bank and sending in her card to Mr. Ayres.

There had been considerable interchange of courtesies between the Ayreses and Miss Belling, the first overture being the presentation to fair Helen of Fido. As soon as Miss Belling heard of Mrs. Ayres' desire for the "dear little creature," she begged she would accept him, "with the love of Helen Belling."

"Such a lovely note as she writes," Mrs. Ayres had declared to Herbie, making a most lovely picture of herself with Fido in her arms. Herbert Ayres could think of little else.

And Fido became a great feature of the Ayres household. Mrs. Ayres had to order ribbons to match every dress she wore, and Mary had to tie them, "just so," and—well, Mrs. Ayres had so much to do, so much to attend to, on "dear Fido," that she forgot to mention Hugh Strathley's name, and never as much as thought of his love affair.

Meanwhile owing to her "dear Helen's lovely gift," Mrs. Ayres invited Miss Belling to dinner, took her to drive, gave her little card parties, and privately assured Herbie "that she liked to have her as a friend, for you know she's too big and ugly to distract your attention, dear!"

This Mr. Ayres assured her would be impossible, yet he too, all owing to Fido, had quite modified his opinion of Miss Belling and forgot he had ever thought her malicious.

To do Miss Belling justice she had, during this period, appeared to great advantage, being moderate in all her views, intelligent in her remarks, evincing an interest in, and understanding of business, that rather pleased Ayres, and altogether she seemed just the companion to tone down his own lovely and erratic Helen. With satisfaction Mr. Ayres remarked certain little matronly ways his wife had assumed, and certainly her affection for Fido was solicitude itself.

As for Hugh Strathley, he was holding himself well out of temptation, never attended any social gathering, and when the gentlemen occasionally met, which now was only for business purposes, Hugh certainly did not look like a man ruining his life with an unhallowed passion.

Ayres rather flattered himself that he had been moderate, and instead of rushing into fighting and scandal, had let things quietly drift along. It certainly was the most comfortable way of doing.

He was sitting in his office thinking about the monthly meeting of the Company and whether

after all it would be well to induce Miss Belling to join with him in proposing a change of officers, when that lady's card was sent in.

He immediately arose, opened the door, placed a chair for the lady, and asked politely if he could be of any service.

"Thank you," said Miss Belling, and then, "Mr. Ayres, I am, as you know, my brother's sole heir, and therefore own his stock in the Milling Company. Five hundred shares, is it not?"

"Yes, madam, five hundred shares exactly. Mr. Belling owned five hundred, Mr. Strathley five hundred, I five hundred, and the other five hundred divided among several."

"Ah! thanks!"

Miss Belling was silent, with her eyes cast down. After a moment or so she raised them, and in a dignified, quiet manner said:

"Mr. Ayres, I am about to say something which you may misunderstand. If you do I will regret speaking, for my motive is of the kindest and my desire is to benefit you and all concerned."

Instantly Ayres' mind reverted to Strathley's passion for Mrs. Ayres, with the feeling of one who sees a ghost walking that he had believed "laid."

Miss Belling noticed the change in his face, and while he said, quietly :

“I will not misunderstand you,” she knew he had been touched.

“Remember, Mr. Ayres,”—the lady spoke with added dignity—“I prefaced my remarks by asking you not to be offended. I now ask you to say nothing of this to your wife;” then more quickly, as Ayres’ face grew redder, “who is, I think, far too innocent and lovely to listen to things of this sort.”

Ayres breathed freer. At least Miss Belling understood that Mrs. Herbert Ayres was no more to blame than the moon is, because children cry for it.

“Mr. Ayres, I said to you some days since,” continued Miss Belling, “that Mr. Strathley was a misguided man, and I did so in pity, for some men can not control their feelings as can other and stronger men.”

Ayres lost this compliment in the angry fear, “If that fool has dared mention my wife’s name, I’ll strangle him,” as he bowed to Miss Belling, who awaited an answer of some sort.

“Opportunity, you know, Mr. Ayres, has so much to do with a man’s attachments,” said Miss



Belling. "Now, if we can remove Mr. Strathley from this place by, at the yearly meeting, defeating him as manager, and by thus taking away his power reduce him to the necessity of seeking other business, we would be doing him a service, that when he is once more sane (this is only a temporary aberration) he will appreciate."

Mr. Ayres did not know which he most admired, Miss Belling's judgment (exactly his own), or the discretion with which she had managed this interview. "Madam," he replied, "your ideas are excellent."

"Then, Mr. Ayres, will you vote with me?"

How delicately she put it! Herbert Ayres was charmed.

"Most certainly," was his unequivocal answer.

"Thanks." The lady rose, adding as if she were asking a favor, "If you will accept the position of proxy and act for me in this matter, I shall appreciate the courtesy."

"Your wish shall be obeyed." The gentleman gallantly attended Miss Belling to her sleigh, standing uncovered as she drove away, deciding that Helen Belling was a thorough lady, possessing great discrimination.

Perhaps the amount of the lady's discrimination

might have startled Herbert Ayres could he have known what Miss Belling thought of him.

“Fool!” the lady spoke now to her inmost thoughts. “Fool! to imagine every man in love with his doll of a wife. If I were after him, I could twirl him about my little finger. And even you, Mr. Strathley, will learn a little discretion and wish you had never slighted me sir.”

## CHAPTER XXIV.

### “THE FRIEND TO THE WIDOW.”

On the morning of the yearly meeting of the company, Hugh whispered something in Eunice's ear, awfully tempted to kiss her, but “biding a wee,” as he said :

“And now, when you hear it, will you forgive me for keeping you at work just because I couldn't well live without you, and—and—will you please wait here for me? I have something I must tell you.”

Of course she said she'd forgive him, and that she'd wait.

Then Hugh went into the meeting as happy as a bridegroom hastening to his bride. All went well until the voting, when, Ayres, rising to announce himself as Miss Belling's proxy, was requested by the manager to tell him :

“If Miss Belling has in her possession, or can produce, any transfers of stock.”

“This is not necessary, sir,” replied Ayres with the formality that now always existed between the two gentlemen. “The stock, Mr. Strathley, is en-

tered on the books, stands in the charter in Jim's name, was always voted by him, and Miss Belling is his sole heir, the other claimants voluntarily declining to contest the will."

Ayres emphasized the voluntarily, wanting Hugh decidedly to understand that he had kept his word; he had proven a friend to the Widow. Hugh, however, did not notice the emphasis, nor Mr. Ayres' expression, being busy turning to an entry in the books of the Consolidated Milling Company.

After the place was found he said, addressing all the gentlemen present:

"Mr. Ayres has made a correct statement in that Miss Helen Belling is the sole heir of Mr. Jim Belling, deceased, but there has been a mistake about the five hundred shares of stock in this company. Five years ago Mr. Jim Belling transferred the entire number, five hundred shares, to his wife, Eunice Belling. I was secretary at the time, the entry is perfectly correct as you will see, made in my own hand-writing. As there has never been any re-transfer, the stock has always been and still is owned by Mrs. Eunice Belling, widow of the said Jim Belling.

"And for the satisfaction of the other stockhold-



ers I will state that the identity of the said Mrs. Eunice Belling with Mrs. Eunice Belling, the typewriter in the office of the Consolidated Milling Company, can be most undoubtedly proven."

There was considerable surprise, the meeting adjourned, and Hugh, joining Eunice, took her hand, passed it through his arm, and instead of walking to Mrs. Jones', where the old lady was preparing her excellent dinner, strolled off toward the lake as if it were basking in summer's sunshine, and was not a glittering expanse of ice.

First Hugh told her of her fortune and then asked her if she were happy.

She thanked him with a smile but did not speak. For out here amid frozen nature the man's love was so hot and passionate a tide, that it overwhelmed her.

Without a word she knew it.

She knew it! And all the fortunes of the world were as nothing.

"Marry me," he said.

And then he kissed her with the rapture of love's first kiss when, biff! such a blow, it nearly knocked his heart out.

Eunice must have felt it.

This was Hugh's first thought as he turned—on his assailant.

Jim Jones!

With chalky face and gleaming eyes, Jim Jones stood before him, squared to fight him, shielding Eunice with his body as, when he had struck Hugh with his fist, he had protected her with his hand. He would protect her with his life.

Dishonor should not touch her.

His great voice shouting:

“Betray her! never!”

“Fool!” called Hugh.

Doubling up his fists, ready for the battle, it looked as if the Widow was to be a prize for a first-class match without gloves.

But the Widow, understanding Jim's words, believing in his goodness and ashamed of his mistake, touched his shoulder.

How quickly Jim turned!

How that light touch had made his great body tremble.

Hugh saw that quivering body and was amazed. Then from his heart came the words, “poor Jim!”

He may have been poor, but he was brave, noble.

He would not let the woman see his pain.

He would not spoil her joy.

For when Eunice said:

“Jim, I love him. He asked me to marry him.”

Jim took her hand and putting it in Hugh's strode away under the leafless trees. And the lovers were in each other's arms.

Who was the friend to the Widow?

THE END.

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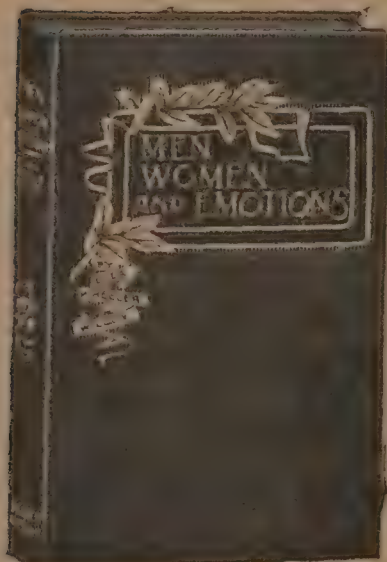
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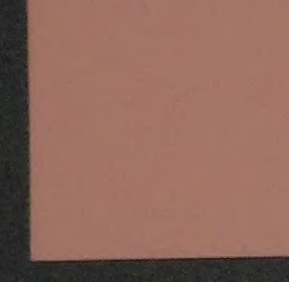
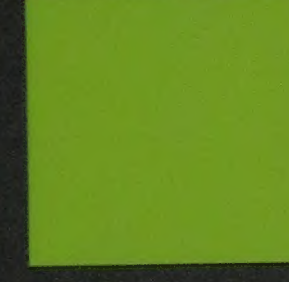
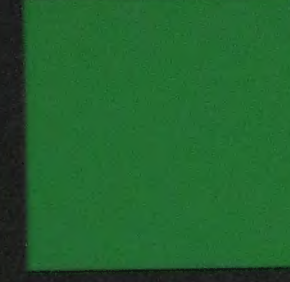
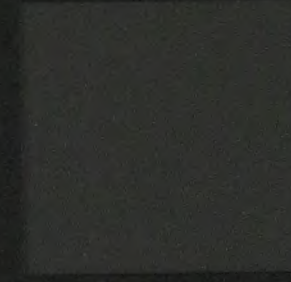
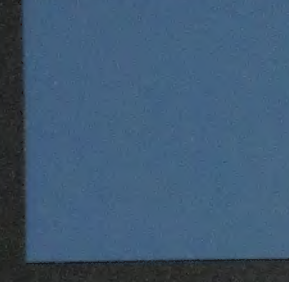
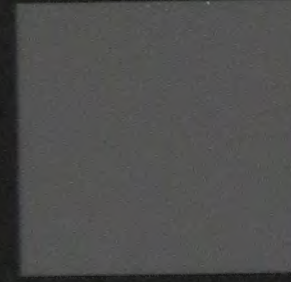
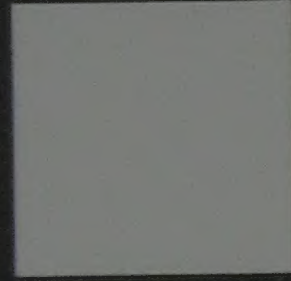








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